THE CHILDREN OF WILTON CHASE

L. T. MEADE

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Diane Parsons
Westlock
Alberta

'Let 'a come away,' whispered Marjorie.

The CHILDREN of WILTON CHASE

By

MRS. L. T. MEADE

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A GIRL IN TEN THOUSAND, A RING OF RUBIES,
GIRLS NEW AND OLD, ETC.

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THIS STORY

IS DEDICATED, WITH AFFECTION,

TO

MARJORY

A CHILD WHO, POSSESSING THE SPIRIT OF LOVE AND SERVICE,

HAS INSPIRED THE IDEA OF THAT OTHER MARJORY

WHO APPEARS IN THESE PAGES.

August, 1891.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Marjorie's Way,	1
II.	Shark,	13
III.	Ermengarde's Sin,	25
IV.	The Day of the Picnic,	32
V.	Locked in the Cupboard,	62
VI.	A Stolen Treasure,	69
VII.	A Good, Boyish Sort of Girl,	82
VIII.	Father's Birthday,	97
IX	Five o'clock in the Morning,	104
X.	The Reign of Chaos,	115
XI.	After the Fun,	133
XII.	After the Birthday,	159
XIII.	Basil's Opinion,	162
XIV.	I Serve,	175
XV.	Lilias,	187
XVI.	The Beautiful Dress,	199
XVII.	The More Beautiful Face,	210
XVIII.	In the Toils,	217
XIX.	Some People who did not Flatter,	228
XX.	What did Basil Mean?	235
XXI.	Susy's Feverish Desire,	241
XXII.	Quite in a New Character,	250
XXIII.	Blessed and Happy,	261

THE

CHILDREN OF WILTON CHASE.

CHAPTER I.

MARJORIE'S WAY.

"I DON'T care," said Ermengarde. "I won't do it! I won't obey her!"

"What are you saying, Ermie?"

Ermengarde was standing by the dressing-table in her room. She had been talking half to herself; she now turned quickly round, and confronted a plain little girl of between eleven and twelve.

"Is that you, Marjorie? I didn't know you were listening. I had not an idea you were in the room."

"But what *did* you say, Ermie? Who is the person you won't obey?"

Marjorie had puckered up her brows. Her

small, shrewd, sensible face looked full of anxiety.

"Now, look here," said Ermengarde, speaking with passion, "don't you interfere! You are always poking your finger into everyone's pie. Leave mine alone. I don't want you to meddle, nor to help me. I understand my own affairs. What is the matter? Are you going to cry?"

"No, Ermengarde. I don't cry. I think it's babyish."

Marjorie walked to the other end of the large bedroom, died on a shabby brown hat, and prepared to leave the room. When she reached the door she turned again, and looked at her sister.

"When Basil comes home——" she began.

"Oh, don't. Why do you talk about Basil?" Ermengarde tossed her hat off her head as she spoke. "And just when I might have been happy! What are you lingering by the door for, Marjorie? Well, if you must know, I am not going to obey Miss Nelson any more. She went a little too far this morning, and I'll show her that I'm Miss Wilton, and that she's only the governess—and—and—— Now, where's that child gone to? I do think Marjorie is a perfect nuisance. I don't see anything good in her. Paul Pry, I call her. Paul Pry, and a little busybody. I suppose she'll go and make up to

Miss Nelson now, and tell her what I've said. No, though, that isn't like her. She does try to stick up for one. Poor little plain mite. Well, I don't intend to obey Miss Nelson, Marjorie or no Marjorie. Basil is coming home from school, and I shall go in the carriage to meet him. I don't care what Miss Nelson said. She's not going to keep me from meeting my own Basil. Why, I was fourteen a month ago—a great many girls are grown up at fourteen. I don't mean English girls, of course, but foreigners, and I'm not going to be kept in surveillance, just as if I was an infant."

Evangarde was quite alone in her nice room. The house was still, for just now the children—there were a good many children at Wilton Chase—were out. The time was the end of July, and on this very day Basil and Eric, the two public-school boys, were coming home. The whole house, that is the nursery and schoolroom part of the house, were in a flutter of expectation and excitement. Nothing ever disturbed the other end of Wilton Chase, where father and Aunt Elizabeth, and the numerous visitors resided. But the nurseries and the schoolrooms were generally noisy apartments, and it was very unusual to have such a stillness as now reigned over the whole of this important portion of the house.

Ermengarde and Marjorie slept in two pretty white beds, side by side, in this nice, large, cheerful bedroom. Ermengarde was completely mistress, but she did not object to Marjorie's company, for Marjorie was very pleading and useful and self-effacing, and Ermie liked to be waited on, and her complaints listened to, and her worries sympathized with.

In many ways she was a commonplace child. She had a handsome little face, and a proud, overbearing manner. She thought a great deal more highly of herself than she ought, and she was a constant trial to Miss Nelson, who was a most patient long-suffering woman.

Ermengarde had been directly disobedient that morning, and as a punishment Miss Nelson had decided that she was not to go in the carriage to meet her brothers at the railway station. The little girl had stared, bridled, drawn herself up in her haughtiest style, and determined openly to defy Miss Nelson.

She had never gone to this length of rebellion before, and when the governess went down to the seashore, accompanied by two or three of the children, she imagined that Ermengarde would attend to her neglected lessons, and presently join them on the beach.

"Marjorie," said the governess, as she suddenly met the little girl in the grounds, "I am

deeply sorry, but I am forced to punish Ermengarde. She is not to go to meet your brothers; but would you—only, my dear child, you do look so dirty and untidy—would you like to go in the carriage? You are a good little girl; it would be a treat for you."

"I could get cleaned in a minute," said Marjorie. "There's my brown Holland overall, and Hudson could brush my hair, and make it tidy."

Then she flushed, and the wistful, eager expression went out of her eyes.

"Perhaps I had better not," she said.

"Why so, my dear child?"

Marjorie was thinking of Ermengarde. She could not complain of her sister, but to sit by and witness her disobedience would destroy her own pleasure.

"Ermie wouldn't like it, either," she whispered under her breath. "I wish I hadn't got honest eyes; Ermie says they look so horrid when I don't like a thing."

"Well, Marjorie, are you going or are you not?" said Miss Nelson.

"I think not, Miss Nelson," said Marjorie, in a cheerful voice. "Nurse says Bob is sure to have another teething fit, so of course he'll be fractious, and she'll want me to pick up shells for him."

"Well, dear, you must please yourself," answered Miss Nelson gently.

She never praised Marjorie for being unselfish—no one did—they only said it was her way, and all the people with whom she came in contact took small kindnesses and small services from her as a matter of course.

Ermengarde was alone in her room, and the house was delightfully still. She waited for another moment, and then going over to the fireplace rang a bell. In a few minutes the schoolroom maid, looking very cross and astonished, answered the summons.

"Hutson, I am going out in the carriage. Please help me to dress," said Ermengarde. "And give directions that I am to be told when the carriage is ready."

"Are you going for the young gentlemen, Miss Ermengarde?"

"Yes."

"Then you must be quick, miss, for Macnab is bringing the horses round now."

Ermengarde had thought of making a very effective toilet, but she had only time to put on a shady hat, her best one, snatch up her parasol and gloves, and run downstairs.

Mr Wilton was going himself to the station to meet his boys. Ermengarde was always a little afraid of her father. She stepped

back now when she saw him, and slightly colored.

"Come, Ermie," he said good-naturedly, "jump in! We must be off at once, or we shall not be in time. I suppose you have been a specially good girl this morning, as Miss Nelson has allowed you to come."

Ermengarde murmured something which her father did not quite hear.

"You have — eh?" he repeated. "Miss Nelson knows you are coming? It is all right, I suppose?"

"Yes, father," said Ermengarde. She raised her eyes; then she got into the carriage with a curious sensation of being suddenly very shrunken and small. She was a rebellious, disobedient child, but she had not often sunk to deliberate falsehood.

The drive through the summer country on this delightful afternoon was so invigorating, and Mr Wilton was so little awe-inspiring, and such a genuinely pleasant, witty, affectionate father that Ermengarde's spirits rose. She forgot her disobedience, that horrible lie which fear had wrung from her lips ceased to trouble her, and she chatted quite gayly to her father.

"Why, Ermie, what a big girl you are growing," he said presently, "and how well you

express yourself! You will be quite a companion to me when you come out."

Ermengarde lifted her handsome eyes. They sparkled with pleasure.

"Well, puss, what is it?" said Mr. Wilton.

"Only I do so wish I could come out now."

"Now? How old are you?"

"Fourteen—really, quite——"

"We'll talk about it, Ermie, when you are seventeen. Eighteen is a better age, but as your poor mother is not living, and I—I—want a companion, I—we'll see about it."

"Father, I do hate Aunt Elizabeth."

"Pooh, what harm does she do you? You mustn't have such strong likes and dislikes, Ermie. You are exactly like me. I was awfully headstrong in my time. Your aunt is an excellent woman. I wonder what I should do without her. There must be some woman at the head of a house, you know, puss."

"When I come out, you'll let me take care of your house for you, won't you, father?"

"What a chit it is."

"But won't you? Do say you will, father. I should so love to govern!"

"I daresay. Here we are quite close to the station now. Easy, Macnab, don't force the horses up this steep bit. Well, puss, what are

you looking so eagerly at me for? So you'd like to govern, eh?"

"Oh, shouldn't I? Dearly, dearly! I'd send Aunt Elizabeth and Miss Nelson away."

"Indeed! A nice household I'd be likely to have."

"Father, I wish you would not laugh at me!"

Mr. Wilton's face generally wore an expression of somewhat kindly sarcasm. Now a sudden look of tenderness came into his dark eyes. He turned and looked at the handsome, restless, dissatisfied girl at his side.

"I don't want to laugh at you, Ernie," he said, "but the fact is, I don't profess to understand half-fledged creatures. If your mother were alive, all would be different. Well, chut, well, I'll see what can be done when the time comes. I want you to help me, of course, when the time comes; that is, if you have the real stuff in you, if you are a true Wilton. All the women of our house are women of honor."

"Honor?" repeated Ermengarde vaguely.

"Yes. Truthful, and above-board, and brave. Marjorie is a Wilton, every inch of her. Hullo! the train is in, and there come my servants. Well, Basil, here you are, sir—and Master Eric, too! Sorry to be home, eh? I make no doubt you are. Now, look here, you villains

you are not going to tear my place to pieces. How many more pets, I wonder?"

"Only some rabbits, gov— father, I mean," said Basil.

"That's right, Basil—you know I don't allow you to 'governor' me—I like the old-fashioned word best. So there are some rabbits, eh? How are they to get home?"

"Oh, they can go with the pigeons and the ferrets," chimed in Eric, a small boy with a freckled face, and bright ruddy-gold hair.

"Isn't the dogcart here, father?" asked Basil.

"No, you're to come home in state in the family coach. A cart ought to be somewhere round for your luggage. The beasts can go in that."

"Oh, not the ferrets," said Eric. "I think perhaps I had better walk home with the ferrets. They might eat through their basket, and get at my fantails."

"Nonsense! stow them away under this seat, and jump in, lads. Do you see Ermie? She's all in a flutter to kiss you."

"How do, Ermie?" said Eric. "Stick your legs well out in front, or the ferrets may bite 'em."

Basil didn't say anything, but he clasped Monsignor's thin fingers in his big brown

hand. Basil's squeeze signified a good deal, and Ermengarde colored up, and her heart swelled with pride and pleasure.

"Jolly weather, isn't it?" said Basil. "I say, aren't we going to have a time! How are all the others? How's Maggie? Are you going to have holidays, too, while we are having ours, Ermie?"

Ermengarde's face flushed again.

"It is unfair," she said. "I wish you'd speak to father about it, Basil. We are only to have half-holidays. Lessons all the morning, and the afternoons with you. I do call it a shame! It's Aunt Elizabeth's doing. She arranged it with Miss Nelson a week ago. I do wish, father, you'd interfere."

"My dear, I never dream of interfering with your Aunt Elizabeth. A pretty mess I'd get into if I did [*otto vose*]—I make no doubt, Ermie, it's a very wise arrangement, and you fellows can have the mornings quite free for long expeditions or anything of that sort."

"Oh, we'll have lots of the girls in the afternoon," said Eric. "I do hope that big ferret isn't making his way out. He *is* a stunner, sir: why, he killed—Ermie, keep your legs away—he has teeth like razors, sir, and once he catches on, he never lets go. He'll suck you to death as likely as not. Now, what's up?"

Ermengarde started from her seat. She felt slightly frightened, and very cross.

"You bring home horrid pets, Eric," she said. "And you have no sympathy, not a bit, and you are selfish, too——"

"Oh, he's a scamp," interrupted Basil; "never mind him."

Again he stretched out his hand and took Ermengarde's.

"Tell me all about the young 'uns," he said. "How are the bees? Did you make a good sale of the honey? I want to buy out my share—come close, I've a secret to whisper to you."

Ermengarde and Basil talked in low excited tones to one another all the rest of the way home. Eric entertained his father with the exploits of his favorite ferret, and the prodigious feats of prowess performed by a certain pouter pigeon of rare lineage. Mr Wilton smoked and encouraged the boy's chatter. The whole party were in high spirits when they drew up at the lodge gates.

CHAPTER II

SHARK.

"HULLO, here's Marjorie!" exclaimed Eric. He vaulted out of the carriage, and flung his arms round Marjorie's little squat figure, lifting her off the ground, and squeezing her in an ecstasy of delight. "Here I am, Mag, and there are two pouters in a cage, and four new fantails—they're coming with the luggage—and I've got a lop-eared rabbit with black spots, and my ferrets—there are two of them in the carriage. Wait until you see Shark's teeth! I call him Shark, he's such a good 'un at biting. We'll have some fun these holidays; don't you make any mistake!"

"Yes, yes, of course we will! I'm delighted, Eric, delighted! Where are the ferrets? When can I see them? Oh, how are you, Basil? Have you on a tight boot to-day? Does your corn pinch you?"

"No, I've got over those small ailments," said Basil. "What a roundabout you are, Marjorie," he continued, pinching her cheek.

"Now, what's the matter? You are quite frowning."

Marjorie's ruddy and good-humored freckled face wore an expression of consternation.

"I made some slippers during the term for you," she said. "They're large, and I wadded them so that they are most comfortable. But —it isn't that—the slippers are in your room. I put them there— Ernie, won't you get out?"

"No," said Ermengarde. "I'm going to drive down to the house."

Marjorie frowned more than ever.

"They are all coming up from the shore: Miss Nelson, and all of them: and they'll see the horses and they'll run. Even Miss Nelson will run, she's so fond of Basil, and——"

Mr. Wilton, who still remained in the carriage by Ermengarde's side, now interposed.

"We won't wait for the small fry," he said. "We'll drive on to the house at once. Oh, yes, Eric, you can go to meet the party from the shore of course, if you like, and Basil too."

"I'll stay with Ernie," said Basil.

He jumped into the carriage again, and they drove down the long winding avenue to the house.

Great elm trees shaded the avenue, and Basil pushed back his cap and looked up into the

green. He was a dark and handsome lad, and his expression was unusually thoughtful for his years.

"How grand those old trees are!" he said. "Whenever I think of home while I'm away, I remember the old elm trees in the avenue, and the rooks' nests—I remember, too——" Here he stopped suddenly, and a wave of red mantled his cheeks. Ermengarde's bright eyes were fixed on him: she guessed his thoughts. Basil had often walked under those elm trees with his mother.

Mr. Wilton had opened the *Times*, and was not attending to the chatter of the young folk.

"You don't look quite the thing, Ermie," said Basil in a low voice.

"I'm perfectly well," she replied.

"But you turned quite white that time at the lodge. I noticed it. That time when Marjorie wanted you to get out. Have you been worrying yourself lately? You know you are such a girl to mope, and make mountains out of mole-hills. School would be the place for you."

Mr. Wilton dropped his paper.

"Are you recommending school for Ermengarde?" he said. "Sometimes I have thought of it, but your mother had a prejudice against school-life for girls, and Ernie does very well

with Miss Nelson and the masters who come here to instruct her. Now here we are, and here's your Aunt Elizabeth."

Miss Wilton was not a graceful woman. She was a feminine edition of her brother, and Mr. Wilton, although handsome as a man, had by no means the type of face which best lends itself to womanly graces.

Miss Wilton was standing on the steps in a riding-habit. Her horse had just been taken round to the stables. She had her whip in her hand, and her masses of hair looked untidy —her face, too, was flushed.

"Rodly, Roderick," she said to her brother, "that groom is past bearing. He had the impertinence —— Oh, is that you, Basil? So you've come back—how are you? Now one thing I do beg, and that is, that you never come into the house except by the side door, and that you and Eric keep your pets to yourselves. I don't mind what is done behind the schoolroom doors, but I will not—I cannot —permit messy lounging schoolboys in my part of the house. Roderick, what is the matter? Are you laughing at me?"

"I think I am, Elizabeth," replied Mr Wilton. "Boys will be boys, and no one can accuse Basil of lounging."

Miss Wilton had a very hearty loud laugh

herself. She indulged in it now, and going up to Basil, hit him a blow on the shoulders.

"You're a true Wilton," she said. "By and by I'll be proud of you—by and by I'll want your help. You shall ride with me, and keep those lazy intolerable grooms in some sort of order, but just at present your place is in the schoolroom part of the house. Ermengarde! You here? Has Miss Nelson promoted you to drive in the carriage? That is an honor only conferred on very good children."

Ermengarde hated to be called a child. She disliked her Aunt Elizabeth's manner to her at all times, and now she flushed and frowned, and looked decidedly unamiable.

"Come, Basil," she said, touching her brother on his arm.

"No, miss, you're not to go with that cross face on," said her aunt. "Look pleasant, or I shall desire Miss Nelson on no account to permit you to drive with your father again. What is it, Roderick? What's the matter?"

"Leave the poor child alone," said Mr Wilton. "Run away, chicks, both of you; run off and be happy. Now, Elizabeth, what is this story about the groom?"

Ermengarde slipped her hand within Basil's arm, and they both walked round to the other side of the house. High tea was spread in the

pleasant schoolroom. Miss Nelson, who looked worried and over-tired, was desiring her pupils to take their places. All the nursery children were to sup in the schoolroom to-night, in honor of the boys' return, and nurse was bringing in toddling Ethel, and little Dick and Bobby, and placing them in their chairs, and then cutting bread-and-butter for them.

Basil rushed down a side passage to a lavatory to wash his hands, and Ermengarde flew upstairs to dispose of her best hat. Miss Nelson had not noticed it.

When the elder boy and girl came into the room the meal had commenced. Marjorie, as usual, was trotting from chair to chair, helping everyone, pushing the butter nearer to Dick or Mollie, the youngest schoolroom child, stopping Bobby's rebellious lips with strawberries, and lugging a great jug of milk in her arms, and with a red face, and chubby hands that would tremble under their load, refilling mugs of milk as fast as they got empty.

"That will do now, Marjorie; you can sit down," called out Miss Nelson.

Marjorie subsided at once into a seat beside Eric.

"Ermengarde," said her governess, glancing quickly at her eldest pupil; "you are late again for tea. You forfeit five marks."

"Oh, I say," exclaimed Basil, "I'm late, too, Miss Nelson. And it wasn't Ernie's fault, her being late this time: she could not help herself. Why, what is the matter, Ernie?"

Ermengarde had given him a shove under the table. He looked round at her, guessed that she did not wish him to say something, and instantly subsided into absolute silence.

Basil was a favorite of Miss Nelson's. He was a kind-hearted lad; he had something of Marjorie's spirit, and was always willing to throw himself into breaches, to heal disputes, to be a sort of peacemaker and server all round. Miss Nelson dreaded beyond anything the long summer vacation when the boys were home from school and the girls had only half work. These were the weeks for disputes, for quarrels, for disagreeables, for scrapes. During these weeks poor Miss Nelson's hair became more gray, and her face more wrinkled and anxious; but she dreaded the holidays, not because Basil was at home, but on account of Eric, who was a perfect imp of mischief, and because all the home children were more or less demoralized by his presence.

Now Miss Nelson smiled into Basil's eyes, handed him a plate of the best strawberries, and after a pause, said: "You'd like me not to punish Ermengarde?"

"Of course I should: she has done nothing to be punished for."

Again Ermengarde kicked him under the table. He was lifting a cup of tea to his lips, and part of its contents were spilt on the white tablecloth, and over his own shirt-cuff. Basil hated messes and awkward ways of doing things. He gave Ermengarde a return kick of some force, murmured, "You're a perfect muff, Ermie," and then looked up, with his momentary annoyance gone, at Miss Nelson.

"Thank you for excusing Ermengarde," he said. "She's under my command now. I'm her captain. I'll see that she's by dead time in the future."

"Well, Ermengarde, you may consider yourself excused," said the governess. "I hope you have thoroughly mastered your imposition. If so, as you must want fresh air, you may go out with Basil for an hour after tea."

Basil glanced at his sister's blooming and blushing face. As he did not want to be kicked any more, however, he was silent. Marjorie had left her seat, and was bringing all the cups up to Miss Nelson to be refilled with tea. As the governess poured some hot water into the teapot she turned again to Ermengarde, "Do you know your piece of poetry, Ermie?"

Ermengarde said "Yes." This happened to be true, for the poem selected for her punishment lesson was "Casabianca," which she admired very much, and had long ago committed to memory for pleasure.

"Yes, I know it quite well, thank you, Miss Nelson," she said in a cheerful voice.

The clouds had left her face; she was now in an excellent humor. To be with Basil was always delightful to her, and she sincerely hoped that her disobedience and open defiance of authority might never be discovered. If it was, she was prepared to defend her action, but she had an intuition that Basil would disapprove. His good opinion was of the utmost value to her: she loved Basil; she had no particular affection for any other human being, unless, perhaps, her father; but Basil's presence caused a warm satisfied glow to steal around her heart.

Miss Nelson had supplied all the second cups of tea. She was again at liberty to ask her favorite a question.

"Basil, I should like to ask you in confidence, has Eric brought home any strange pets this time?"

Basil's eyes sparkled.

"Only two ferrets," he said; "and two carrier pigeons, and two fantails, and a pouter (Eric is

dead rats on that pantry, and a lop-eared rabbit. I think that's all. I have some pups, too," he added modestly, "but they are coming by parcel-post to-morrow."

"By parcel-post Basil!" here almost screamed Marjorie. "Oh, I hope they won't be pushed."

"Silence, children!" said the governess. A red spot had risen on both her cheeks. "I had hoped no more pets were coming. And ferrets! I dread ferrets. Now the pups——"

"But they're of a very wicked breed," shouted Eric. "They're worse than toy ferret Shark. They are young bloodhounds. Don't you deny it, Basil. You know you gave a vow for them to Dandy Macjones."

"But they are quite harmless at present," said Basil. "There are only two: they haven't arrived yet. They'll come by post, or train, or something to-morrow. When they do come, I'll promise to be careful."

"Yes, Basil, I believe you are a boy to be trusted.—Eric!"

"What is it, ma'am?"

Eric put on a comical face, which set all the nursery children laughing.

"Stand up, Eric. While you are at home, at least whenever you are in the schoolroom—in fact, I may say always—you have got to yield to my authority."

"Thank you, ma'am. I didn't know it, ma'am."

Eric pulled his forelock after the fashion of a charity schoolboy. The nursery children clapped their hands with delight, and a wave of color swept over Miss Nelson's face.

"I say, shut up and be respectful," growled Basil.

Eric glanced at his brother. His whole funny face became rigid except his eyes, which still danced with mirth. He folded his hands on his breast, and said in a demure, mincing tone, "I beg your pardon, Miss Nelson."

Even the governess had to smile.

"It is granted, my dear boy. Now with regard to your pets. The rabbits are not to be in the house."

"Oh, no, ma'am."

"There's no rabbit-hutch."

"I'll stow them somewhere, Miss Nelson."

"See you do. The pigeons can share the dovecotes, I suppose."

"Very well, Miss Nelson."

"The ferrets —" here Miss Nelson almost shivered. "Dangerous, disgusting beasts!"

"I say, don't," exclaimed Eric. "Shark's a stunner!"

"Their teeth," continued the governess. "I have heard that their teeth can penetrate through any obstacle."

"Shark's teeth!" pursued Eric. "Well, they ought to be strong: he has six rows; when he opens his mouth they stand upright."

"Six rows! Nonsense, Eric. Please don't talk in that silly way. And once for all understand that I cannot allow that animal to be kept on the premises."

"But he's a stunner," said Eric. "Shall I bring him in for you to see?"

"You must not attempt it, sir. It is awful to think of such a horrid creature being so close to one, and I forbid you to bring it into the house."

"You shall see him, you shall see him," said Eric. "He's a perfect tip-topper. He'd kill anything. I paid five bob for him, and six ginger-beers, and ten and a half Betty cakes."

"Silence, Eric; I shall have to speak to your father. Keep the ferret in his basket or box until I can have a word with Mr. Wilton."

"But he'll starve, ma'am. He'd gnaw *you* if he was starving."

"That will do. Leave the table now, all children. I can let you know before bed-time, Eric, what is to be done with that monster."

CHAPTER III.

ERMENGARDE'S SIN.

LATE that evening, after the young folk had gone to bed, Miss Nelson, having attired herself in a very neat black silk dress, with ruffles of real lace round her neck and wrists, her best brooch at her throat, and a pretty little head-dress of lace and ribbon becomingly arranged over her iron-gray hair, went down past the schoolroom, past the heavy oak door which divided the children's part of the house from that portion where, according to Ermengarde, all the gay life and all the fun went on, and finally tapped at Mr. Wilton's study-door.

It so happened that there were no visitors staying at Wilton Chase to-night: many friends were expected the following day, but to-night Miss Nelson knew that she would find Mr. Wilton and probably his sister disengaged.

Her tap was responded to by a hearty "Come in!" She was right. Mr. and Miss Wilton were both in the study. Miss Wilton was seated at her davenport scribbling off letters at

furious speed, and Mr. Wilton was indulging in a cigar by the open window,

"Well, Miss Nelson," he said courteously; "I am glad to see you."

He placed a chair for the governess, and waited for her to speak.

"I have come——" said Miss Nelson.

She cleared her throat, she felt a little nervous.

"I have come about a—a shark——"

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed Miss Wilton. She quite jumped, and the pen dropped from her hand. "You hear her, Roderick. How interesting! Has one been seen off the coast?"

"I mean a ferret," said Miss Nelson. "Its name is Shark. I've got confused. Pray pardon me. One of the boys has brought it home."

"Oh, Eric," said Mr Wilton. "I heard him chattering about it, the little scamp. Well, Miss Nelson," he could not help laughing. "Has that young prodigy of mine tried to frighten you unnecessarily."

"He did say the creature had six rows of teeth," said Miss Nelson; "of course that is nonsense; but is a ferret a safe animal to have in the house with so many young children about, and nurse not too careful?"

"Certainly not. Thank you for coming and

telling us about it, Miss Nelson. Ferrets are not safe creatures to have near children, and Eric's shall be removed to the gamekeeper's to-morrow."

Miss Nelson rose at once to leave the room.

"Sit down, Miss Nelson," suddenly interrupted Miss Wilton. "As you are here I have just a word to say to you. Do you think it well to allow Ermengarde to drive in the carriage without your escort. It so happened that my brother was able to accompany her to-day but I—of course I don't like to interfere—still I should have thought that it was scarcely wise. Ermengarde is inclined to be too forward as it is."

"Ermie in the carriage to-day!" exclaimed Miss Nelson. She forgot to keep her seat. She stood up, her pale face was deeply flushed. "Impossible, Miss Wilton! Pardon me, you must be mistaken. Ermengarde was not—not quite—she infringed some of my rules, and I was obliged to give her a detention lesson. She certainly did ask to go and meet her brothers, but I was obliged to refuse. Ermie spent the afternoon indoors."

Miss Wilton sounded a gong by her side. A page appeared, to whom she gave some letters.

"See they are posted at once," she said. Then she turned to the window. "Roderick, are

you asleep, or did you hear what Miss Nelson said?"

"I beg your pardon, my dear, I confess I was not attending. I thought you ladies were discussing some domestic matter."

"We were: a very domestic matter. Roderick, kindly tell Miss Nelson who was your companion to the railway station this afternoon."

"Why, Ermengarde, of course. And very pleasant she made herself. I was going to tell you, Miss Nelson, when I had the opportunity, how pleased I am with the progress of your pupil."

"Thank you," said Miss Nelson. The flush on her face had changed to pallor.

"You did not know of this?" continued Miss Wilton eagerly. "You are astonished!"

Miss Nelson was silent for several seconds.

"I will speak to Ernie," she said: then in a low voice, "there has been a misunderstanding."

She did not add any more, and Mr. Wilton, thinking that the governess looked tired and ill, tried to engage her in some general conversation. She answered a question or two in a very abstracted manner, and presently left the room.

Miss Nelson had a private sitting-room, which was not thrown open to her pupils. It

was a tiny room, but the governess loved it very much. She kept her favorite photographs here, and her best prized books. Here she was absolutely her own mistress and she sometimes called the little room "Home, sweet Home." Miss Nelson was a well-educated woman; she was between forty and fifty years of age; she had a staid and somewhat cold manner, but she was a good disciplinarian, and thoroughly conscientious. When Mrs. Wilton had died three years ago, Miss Nelson had come to the Chase. Mrs. Wilton on her deathbed had asked her husband to secure Miss Nelson's services, if possible, for the children, and this fact alone would have prevented his ever parting with the governess.

Miss Nelson was all that was honorable and kind, but a sort of impenetrable reserve prevented her showing the real affection she felt for her pupils. Consequently Ermengarde disliked her, Lucy tolerated her, the nursery children were supremely indifferent to her, and Marjorie alone loved her. This latter fact did not raise Miss Nelson in anyone's estimation. It was Marjorie's fashion to love people; it would have been unnatural, uncanny to hear round, good humored Marjorie abusing people. Marjorie's affection was bestowed on all creatures, therefore being common, it was

in Ernie's opinion at least, a rather worthless thing to secure.

Miss Nelson went into her private room now, shut and locked the door, sat down in her easy-chair and burst into tears. She was shocked at Ermengarde's disobedience; Ernie's open defiance of her authority almost terrified her. She loved all the children whom she taught, she would have done anything, gone to the length of any sacrifice, for their sakes. She wanted them to grow up good, honorable, worthy of their mother, whose memory she revered. It was easy to prophesy a bright future for Marjorie. Little Lucy, too, was a fairly amenable child; but Ermengarde, who was as proud and reserved as Miss Nelson herself—the governess trembled when she reflected how small was her power over this wayward child.

She thought for a long time: three courses of action were open to her. She might go to Mr. Wilton, open her heart to him, tell him all her doubts and fears, and ask him to remove Ermengarde from her care. Or she might talk to the little girl, tell her that she would shield her from her father's anger, show her in gentle words how wrong her action had been, assure her of the deep love she really felt for her, and finally forgive her. Or again

she might speak severely to Ermengarde, and her severe words might be followed by severe discipline. She could promise not to reveal her pupil's guilt to Mr. Wilton, but the punishment she would herself inflict would be a grave one.

Miss Nelson thought far into the night. Before she went to bed, she decided to pursue the last idea which came to her, for it seemed quite plain to her own mind that Ermengarde's sin could not be expiated except through punishment.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DAY OF THE PICNIC.

EARLY the next morning Marjorie stirred in her white bed. Then she opened her eyes, raised her head from her comfortable pillow, and gazed around her.

Ernie was fast asleep. The sun was pouring into the room: the clock on the mantelpiece pointed to six.

softly, very softly, Marjorie poked her pink toes from under the bedclothes. Then the whole of her feet appeared, then she stood upright on the floor. No one should help her over her toilet this morning: she would dress, and go out into the garden. The boys were at home: it was going to be a brilliant day. Marjorie's contented heart danced within her. She washed and dressed herself with expedition. It was not necessary to be particularly quiet, for nothing ever disturbed Ermengarde's slumbers.

Having dressed and plaited her thick hair as well as she could without aid, she knelt down

by her bedside, clasped her hands over her plump face, and repeated her prayers. Once, long ago now, Mrs. Wilton had given the children, Marjorie among them, a little model prayer to repeat. One of the phrases in it was this: "Please make me a faithful servant of Jesus Christ."

Marjorie remembered quite well the first time she had used this prayer. She recalled the expression on her mother's face, and could have told anyone who asked her her mother's explanation of the word servant.

The other children had forgotten the model prayer, but Marjorie used it always. Every morning she asked God to make her a faithful servant. It was not at all difficult for this humble little girl really to pray. No one in the house guessed at Marjorie's prayer, or troubled their heads about her comforting, comfortable, unselfish ways. She was there, a plain child, useful enough, and obliging enough, but no one thanked her, or wondered if they should miss her if she were not in the house.

She was leaving the room this morning, when Ermengarde stirred and opened her eyes.

"Is that you, Maggie? oh, you're dressed. Don't go for a minute. I want to speak to you."

Marjorie closed the door which she had half opened, and went and stood by Ermengarde's bed.

"Well?" she said.

"I'm sleepy; it's frightfully early. If I talk to you, I'll get wide-awake. Can't you just wait in the room for a little?"

"I'm going into the garden, and I'll come back again, Ermie. Eric may be up, and he has promised to show me Shark. I don't believe he has got six rows of teeth."

"How you chatter, Maggie! Now I'm quite woke up. I'll have a headache most likely this afternoon. I generally do when my first sleep is disturbed."

"You have had a very long first sleep," said Marjorie. "It's half-past six o'clock."

"Is it? It's all the same to me what the time is: I'm woke up now, and it's your fault. You might be considerate, Maggie: you're the most thoughtless child. If you had sat quietly by my bedside I wouldn't be wide-awake now."

"Well, what can I do for you now that you are awake, Ermie?" asked Marjorie. "Please tell me quickly, for I can't keep Eric waiting."

"Oh, it will be all Eric with you from this out. I might have guessed that."

"No, it won't. It will be all everybody. Now, what am I to do for you?"

Ermengarde laughed.

"Maggie, don't put on that solemn face. Of course you are a good little thing. Now listen. Last night Basil and I made a plan."

"O Ermie! Weren't you in luck that Miss Nelson never found out about your wickedness yesterday?"

"My wickedness?"

Ermengarde colored brightly.

"Don't you remember, Ermie? Going in the carriage when Miss Nelson told you not. Of course you were dreadfully wicked, but I'm glad you were not found out. Now, what's the plan?"

"You're so rude and frank, Maggie. It's a horrid habit you have. I had forgotten all about that drive. And now you remind me and spoil my pleasure. You are a tactless creature!"

"Never mind about me. What's the plan?"

"It's this. Dear, I hope the day is fine!"

"Yes, Ermie, it's a lovely day."

"Well, Basil thinks—are you sure the sky is not cloudy, Mag?"

"No, perfect, not a flake anywhere: go on, Ermie."

"Jolly! Basil thinks we ought to have a whole holiday to-day—we girls, I mean. He says we might have a picnic, and go up the lake, and land and dine on Pearl Island."

"Lovely!" said Marjorie, clasping her hands. "Only Miss Nelson said——"

"That's just it, you always will think first of Miss Nelson."

"Ermie, you said I thought first of Eric a minute ago."

"That's another of your horrid habits, casting one's words up to one."

Marjorie clasped her hands in front of her, and closed her lips. Her round face looked stubborn.

"I'm sure Eric is in the garden," she said.

"I'll let you go in a minute, you impatient child. Of course Miss Nelson wants us to have lessons, but of course father is the person we must really obey. I know father is going to London to-day, and he will leave by the early train. And what I want you to do is this, Maggie; to wait about for father, and catch him, and get him to consent to give us a holiday to-day. If he says so, of course Miss Nelson has got to submit."

"All right," said Marjorie. "I don't mind a bit. Eric and I can watch for the carriage, and perhaps Macnab will let us drive round to the house. Then we'll do our best to get father to consent."

She did not wait to exchange any more words with her sister, but dashed out of the room.

At eight o'clock the schoolroom party assembled for breakfast. Miss Nelson had decided not to say anything to Ermengarde until the meal was over. Her salutation of the little girl was scarcely more cold than usual, and Ermie sat down to the breakfast-table without the least idea that her delinquency of the day before had been discovered.

Marjorie was the late one on this occasion. She rushed into the room with her hair unplaited and her cheeks glowing.

"A holiday! a holiday!" she cried. "Father has asked you to give us a holiday, please, Miss Nelson, in honor of the boys. A lovely whole holiday! Father has gone to London, but he scribbled you a message on this card. Here it is! You'll say yes, won't you, Miss Nelson? and oh, it is such a lovely day!"

"Get your hair plaited properly, Marjorie, and come and sit down to breakfast," said her governess. She received Mr. Wilton's card without comment.

Ermengarde and Basil, however, exhanged delighted grimaces, and Basil, bending forward in that courteous way which always won the heart of the governess, said, "You will let us all have the holiday together, as my father wishes it?"

"You can go, of course, Basil," replied Miss Nelson.

She laid a stress on the word "you," but neither Basil nor Ermengarde noticed it. They began to chat together over the delights of the day which lay before them. The holiday spirit was caught up by the younger children, and soon an uproar and excitement of delight arose, which even Miss Nelson could not stem.

In the midst of the general hubbub, she touched Ermengarde on her shoulder.

"I want a word with you, my dear. Come with me."

In some astonishment Ermengarde rose to comply. The governess took her into her own little room.

"Shut the door," she said.

She sat down herself, and Ermengarde stood before her. Her face was pale, her voice shook.

"Ermengarde, will you now repeat your imposition poem."

"Casabianca," said Ermengarde. She had felt a vague sense of uneasiness at Miss Nelson's manner. Now her brow cleared. She recited the whole poem with scarcely a mistake, and with some show of feeling.

"You have said it well," said the governess. "It relates the extraordinary exploit of a noble-hearted child. I grieve to say there are few

such in the world. May I ask you when you learned this poem, Ermengarde?"

"Yesterday——" began Ermengarde.

"No, don't go on. I will save you, I must save you, poor child, from yourself. You would tell another lie. You would deceive again. Ermie, I have loved you. I—I—have suffered for you."

"I don't know what you mean," said Ermengarde, in a voice which shook with anger. "Am I to be—are dreadful things to be said of me? Why do you accuse me of telling lies? Why?"

"No more, my dear pupil. For, notwithstanding your refractory and rebellious state, you are still my dear pupil."

"You are not my dear teacher, there!"

"Hush. I cannot permit impertinence! Ermengarde, I did not look for open and direct disobedience from you. You are full of faults, but I did not think deceit was one of them. I have found out about your drive yesterday."

"Oh!" said Ermie. Her face grew very pale. "Did—did Marjorie tell you? If I thought that——"

"No matter who told me. Don't blame your sister. She's worth twenty of you. Think of your own sin. Ermengarde, you have hurt me deeply."

"I don't care," said Ermengarde. "I said I'd go, and I went. I don't care."

"Poor child! I can only be very sorry for you. I can only pray God to bring you to a different state of mind. You thought to hide your sin from me. God knew it all the time."

Ermengarde shuffled from one foot to another. There was not a trace of repentance about her face or manner.

"At one time I thought I must tell all to your father."

Ermengarde started at this.

"I resolved not to do so."

Her face grew relieved.

"But, Ermengarde," continued the governess, "it is my duty, my solemn duty, to punish you severely. The full extent of that punishment I have not yet determined on, but to-day you spend in this room, where your meals will be brought to you."

"Oh, no, no; not that," said Ermengarde suddenly. "Not to-day, not the holiday! Let my punishment begin to-morrow, please, Miss Nelson. Do say yes, Miss Nelson. It would be terrible not to have the holiday with Basil, and for Basil to know the reason. Do yield on this point, please, Miss Nelson, please, please, and I'll try to be a better girl in future, I will truly."

"No, Ermengarde; the punishment, being merited and severe, must begin on the day you feel it most. I am sorry for you, but I cannot, I dare not yield. God help you, poor child, to a sorrow which leads to repentance."

The governess left the room, locking the door behind her.

Ermengarde stood quite still for a moment, as if she was stunned. Then she rushed to the door and tried to open it.

Miss Nelson went back to the schoolroom.

"You can have your holiday, children," she said. "Ermengarde cannot come, nor am I at liberty to explain her absence. No, Basil; you must not ask me. You must be happy without your sister to-day, and trust that what is right is being done for her. Now, about the picnic. Maggie, come here, my love. You shall take a message to cook."

"You'll come too, won't you, Miss Nelson?" asked Marjorie.

"I must, my dear. I could not allow wild young creatures like you to embark on such an expedition without me."

"And may all the babies come, Miss Nelson?"

"Yes, if nurse can accompany them."

"It seems a pity about poor Ernie."

"Do not speak of her, Marjorie. You must trust your governess to do what is right."

Marjorie's round face looked full of concern. She had a way of putting her finger to her lip when she was harassed about anything. This trick gave her the appearance of a great overgrown baby.

"Go at once and see the cook, my dear," said the governess.

Marjorie turned and left the room. In the passage she met Basil.

"What is this about Ernie?" he said at once.

"I think I know," said Marjorie. "I think I can guess."

"You'll tell me, won't you, Maggie?"

"I don't think I can, Basil. Ernie is a little—little headstrong, and Miss Nelson, sometimes Miss Nelson is severe to Ernie."

"I shan't like her if she is," said Basil. "I don't care a bit about the picnic without Ermengarde, and I do consider it provoking of Miss Nelson to keep Ernie at home on my very first holiday."

"Oh, but you know she must maintain discipline," said Marjorie, putting her finger to her lip again.

Basil burst out laughing.

"Don't use such solemn words, Mag," he said. "You are only a baby; words of wisdom don't suit you a bit."

"I'm choppin'," said Marjorie, in a hurt voice.

She ran off to the kitchen, and delivered her message. The cook, who was fond of good-humored little Marjorie, consulted her about the viands. She replied solemnly, and tried to look interested, but the zest had gone out of her voice. The first moment she had to spare she rushed to her school-desk, and scribbled a note.

"Dear Ernie," she said, "I'm miserable that the wickedness is discovered. Don't be a bit frightened though, for Basil shan't guess anything. Your fond sister, MARJORIE WILTON."

This note Marjorie inclosed in one of her favorite envelopes, with a forget-me-not wreath in blue on the flap, and before the schoolroom party started for the picnic, she pushed it under the door of Miss Nelson's sitting-room.

Ermengarde had expanded her first note, and she was very glad to pick up Marjorie's note, and to read it. At first the contents of the note gave her a slight feeling of satisfaction, and a glow of gratitude to her little sister rushed over her. But then she remembered Miss Nelson's words, and the conviction once more ran through her mind that Marjorie must have been the one to tell.

"She is a canting little thing," said Ermengarde in a passion. "*My* wickedness, indeed! Who else would call an innocent drive wicked

ness? Oh, yes; she let out the whole story to Miss Nelson, and now she wants to come round me with this letter, after her horrid sneaking way. Little monkey! Horrid, ugly little thing, too. Tell-tale-tit, your tongue shall be slit. No, no, Miss Marjorie: you need not suppose that this note blinds me! I know what you've done to me and I'll never forgive you—never, as long as I live!"

Ermengarde now tore up the poor little letter, and opening the window scattered the tiny fragments to the breeze. Once again her anger scarcely knew any bounds. They were away, the whole happy party, and she was shut up in a dull room, compelled to endure solitary confinement all through this glorious August day. It was insufferable, it was maddening, and it was all Marjorie's fault!

It is astonishing how soon the mind, when angry, can establish within itself a fixed idea. Miss Nelson had said nothing to really draw suspicion on Marjorie, and yet Ermengarde was now thoroughly convinced that the little girl had been the one to tell of her misdemeanor. She did not trouble herself to examine proofs. All Marjorie's amiable and good-natured ways were as nothing to Ermengarde then. She had certainly told, and as long as she lived Erma would never forgive her.

Just then, while her anger was at its height, she heard a low whistle under the open window. She rushed over to it, and popped out her head. Basil was standing underneath.

"Don't, Basil," said Ermengarde; "do go away, please. I hate you to find me here a prisoner."

"Oh, stuff, Ernie, don't be tragic over it. It's only for a day at the most, and what's a day?"

"What's a day? One of your holidays—the first of your holidays!"

"Well, there are lots more to follow. Bear it with a good grace. It will soon be over."

"Basil, I thought you had gone with the others."

"I wasn't ready, and Maggie has promised to send the boat back for me."

"Maggie! As if she could give orders."

"She can remind other people though. I'd back Maggie any day never to forget what a fellow wants."

"Oh, yes, she's first with everyone. It's a very nasty stifling hot day."

"Poor Ernie, you're cross, so you see everything distorted. You know whose pet you are, as well as possible—and the day is perfect, superb."

"Am I really your pet, Basil?"

"You conceited puss, you know you are. So is Maggie, too. She's a little darling."

The latter part of Basil's speech brought the cloud once again to Ermengarde's face.

"Oh, of course Maggie is everyone's pet," she said.

Her brother interrupted her. "Don't begin that nonsense over again, Ernie; it's too childish. You are under punishment. I don't know for what. Of course I'm awfully vexed. But why abuse poor little Mag? I say, though, do you like apples?"

"Apples? Pretty well."

"You mean awfully. I have brought you some beauties."

"How can I get them? I'm a prisoner here."

"Oh, not about your being a prisoner. Well, fair lady, you see if your knight can't come to your assistance. Now, catch!"

He threw up a small piece of cord which he had weighted with lead. Ermengarde secured it.

"Pull, pull away! You will soon be in possession of the spoil."

Ermengarde pulled, and presently a dainty basket, which she recognized as Majorie's most treasured receptacle for her working things, was grasped by her willing hands.

"Now, goodby, Ernie. I'm off. The boat will be back by now. Of course I shan't

botanize without you to-day, never fear. By-by; eat your apples, and reflect on the shortness of a single day."

Basil bounded across the lawn, cleared the haha at the end, and disappeared from view.

His interview with Ermengarde had both a soothing and a tonic effect on her. She felt almost cheerful as she sat by the open window, and munched her apples. That basket contained more than apples. There was one large peach, and two slices of rich plumcake were stowed away under the fruit. Then, perhaps dearest possession of all, Marjorie's own special copy of "Alice in Wonderland" lay at the bottom of the basket.

After making a hearty meal of the fruit and cake, Ermengarde drew Miss Nelson's own easy-chair in front of the window, and taking up Marjorie's book began to read. She felt almost comfortable now; the punishment was not so unbearable when a brother sympathized and a sister lent of her best. The precious little copy of "Alice" had received a stain from the juice of the peach, and Ermengarde tried to wipe it out, and felt sorry for its owner.

After all Marjorie was good-natured, and if she had been base enough to tell, she had at least the grace to be sorry afterward. Ermen-

garde thought she would ask Marjorie when she had told, how she had told, and where. She felt that she must believe her little sister, for no one had ever heard even the semblance of an untruth pass Marjorie's honest lips.

Ermengarde sat on, and tried to lose herself in Alice's adventures. She was not at all sorry for her disobedience of the day before, but she was no longer in a state of despair, for her punishment seemed finite, and but for the thought of the wild happiness of the others, her present state was scarcely unendurable.

Just then, raising her eyes, she saw a little girl walking down one of the side-paths which led round to the kitchens. She was a girl scarcely as tall as herself, neatly dressed in a pink cotton frock and white sun-bonnet. Her legs were encased in nice black stockings, and her small dainty feet were shining shoes with buckles. Ermengarde instantly dropped her book, leaned half out of the window, and called in a loud voice, "Susy Susy—Susan Collins! come here!"

Little Susan raised an extremely pretty face, blushed, laughed, and ran gayly forward.

"Is that you, Miss Ermengarde?" she said. "I thought you were away with the others. Father has helped to take them up to Pearl Island, better than two hours ago now."

"Did they look happy, Susy? Tell me about them. Did you see them go?"

"Yes, miss. I was standing behind the rose-bushes. Miss Maggie, she did laugh wonderful, and Master Eric, he just dashed in to give us his ferrets to take care of for him, miss."

"And was Basil there, Susy?"

"No, miss, they went off without him. I heard father say he'd bring back the boat for Master Basil, and I thought for sure you'd be going with him, miss. I hope, Miss Ermengarde, you ain't ill."

"I'm not ill in body, Susan. But I've been most basely treated. I've been betrayed."

"Oh, my word!" said Susan Collins. She pushed back her sunbonnet, and revealed her whole charming curly golden head. She was a beautiful little girl, and Ermengarde had long ago made a secret friend of her.

"I've been betrayed, Susy," continued Ermie. "But I can't tell you by whom. Only *some one* has told tales about me, and so I have been punished, and have been locked up in this room. I'm locked up now; I can't get out. I'm a prisoner!"

Ermengarde felt her woes all the more keenly as she related them. Susy's blue eyes grew bright with pity.

"Ain't it cruel?" she said. "I call it base to

punish a lady like you, Miss Ermengarde, and you one of the best of created mortals."

"It's Miss Nelson," said Ermengarde. "She's dreadfully prejudiced: I find it almost impossible to endure her."

"I never did think nothing of that governess," said Susan with vigor. "It ain't for me to say it, but she don't seem fit company for the like of you, Miss Ermengarde. If I was you, I'd pay her out, that I would."

"Oh, I have more than her to pay out," said Ermengarde. "I have been very unkindly treated."

"That you have, miss, I'm sure."

Susy's sympathy was very sweet to Ermengarde. She leaned farther out of the window, and looked down at the pretty little girl.

"I'm glad you were passing, Susy," she said.

"I'll stay for a bit, if you like, miss. I'm in no sort of a hurry."

"I wish you could come and sit with me, Susy: I can't shout to you from the window. People who are passing may hear us."

"That they may, miss. There never was a truer saying than that trees have ears."

Ermengarde looked round her apprehensively. She had been many times forbidden to have any intercourse with Susan Collins, whose

father, although he retained his post as gamekeeper, was regarded by Mr. Wilton as a somewhat shady character. Ermengarde fancied she liked Susy because of the little girl's remarkable beauty, but the real reason why her fancy was captivated was because Susy was an adroit flatterer.

When she spoke about trees having ears, Ermengarde glanced to right and left.

"Perhaps you had better go," she said. "I have got into one scrape. I don't want to get into a second."

"There's no one round yet, miss. The men are all at their dinners."

"Well, but some of the housemaids."

"There are none of them in sight, Miss Ermengarde. Do you think I'd get you into trouble on my account? Oh, dear, I wish I could come up and sit with you for a little."

"I wish you could, Susy."

"Well, miss, it's easy done, if you'll only say the word."

"What do you mean? This door is locked. Hudson has to bring me my meals, and no one in all the world can bribe Hudson to open the door."

"I don't want her to, miss. Oh, Miss Ermengarde, you are treated 'ard."

"Yes, Susy, I am treated very hard. Well, as you can't come and keep me company, you had better go away."

"But I can come to you, miss. A locked door won't keep me out. I'll hide my basket of eggs behind that laurel bush and then I'll be with you in a jiffy."

"Can you really come? What fun! You are a clever girl, Susy."

"You wait and see, miss."

Susan Collins rushed off, quickly hid her basket, and returning, climbed up an elm tree which happened to grow a few feet from the window, with the lightness and agility of a cat. When she reached a certain bough she lay along it, and propelled herself very gently forward in the direction of the window.

"Now stretch out your two hands, miss."

Ermengarde did so, and in a moment Susy was standing by her side in Miss Nelson's pretty little room.

"My word!" she exclaimed. "I never see'd such a lot of grand things before. Tell me, Miss Ermengarde, do all these fine books and pictures belong to the governess?"

"Oh, yes; those are pictures of Miss Nelson's friends."

"Dear me, what a queer-looking young lady

that is that one in the white dress, and long legs, and the hair done old-fashioned like."

"That?" said Ermengarde. She went over and stood by the mantelpiece, and looked at a large, somewhat faded miniature which held a place of honor among a group of many other pictures and photographs.

"Ain't she a queer-looking child?" said Susy. "Why, she has a look of Miss Nelson herself. Do you know who she is, Miss Ermengarde?"

"No," said Ermengarde. "But I think there's a story about that picture. Marjorie knows. Marjorie has a way of poking and prying into everything. She's awfully inquisitive. I don't interest myself in matters in which I have no concern. Now come over and sit by the window, Susy. You must sit back, so that no one can see us from the grounds; and when Hudson brings my dinner, you must dart into that cupboard just behind us.'

"Oh, yes, miss. Hudson won't catch me poaching on these preserves."

Susy was fond of using expressions which belonged to her father's profession. She was a very imaginative child; and one secret of her power over Ermengarde was her ability to tell long and wonderful stories. Horrible, most of these tales were—histories of poachers, which she had partly heard from her father, and

partly made up herself. Ermengarde used to hold her breath while she listened. Between these thrilling tales, Susan artfully flattered. It was not necessary to make her compliments too delicate. She could say the same thing every time they met. She could tell Ermengarde that never, since the world was created, was there to be found such another beautiful, clever, and noble little girl as Ermengarde Wilton. Ermie was never tired of hearing these praises.

She was very glad to listen to them now. By the time Susan Collins had been half an hour in the room, Ermie was once more certain that Marjorie had betrayed her, that Miss Nelson was the most tyrannical of mortals, and that she herself was the most ill-used of little girls.

At the end of half an hour Hudson unlocked the door, and brought in some dinner for Ermie. When the key was heard in the lock, Susan hid herself in a deep cupboard which stood behind a screen.

Hudson laid down the tray with Ermengarde's dinner, told her to eat plenty, and retired. As she left the room she said she would return for the tray in half an hour. She did not say any word of sympathy to Ermengarde. Hudson was always on the side of

discipline: she thought that the children of the present day sadly needed correction; and when one of the young Wiltons was punished, she generally owned to a sense of rejoicing. That did not, however, prevent her supplying the culprit with an excellent meal, and Ermengarde now raised the covers from a plump duck done to perfection, some green peas, and delicious floury new potatoes. A greengage tart, with a little jug of cream, also awaited the young lady's pleasure.

She called Susy out of her cupboard with a glad voice.

"Come, Susan," she said, "there's plenty for us both. As there are only plates and knives and forks for one, I'll eat first, of course, but you can wash the things up, and have a good meal after me. We must be quick about it though, for Hudson will be back in half an hour."

"Oh, yes, miss, that we will. I'm wonderful hungry, Miss Ermengarde, and your nice dinner do look enticing."

At the appointed time Hudson returned. She brought in a couple of peaches and a bunch of grapes for Ermengarde.

"Miss Ermengarde!" she said in consternation, "you don't mean to say you've eaten up all the duck! And the tart, too,! Well, I do call that

greedy. Where's the sorrow that worketh to repentance when there's such an appetite? You'll be ill, miss, and no wonder."

"But I didn't eat all the duck, really, Hudson—I didn't truly!"

"My dear, what's left of it? Only a little bit of the back. Why, this plump bird ought to have dined three people. Miss Ermengarde, you certainly will be very ill, and you deserve it. No, I won't leave these peaches and grapes. I'd be afraid. Good-afternoon, miss. I'll look in at tea-time. But don't you expect nothing but dry toast then."

Hudson took her tray down to the kitchen, where she remarked on Ermie's enormous appetite.

"A whole duck!" she said. "I didn't think any young lady could eat so much. And most times Miss Ermie picks at her food."

Upstairs, in Miss Nelson's pretty little sitting-room, Ermengarde was scolding Susy for eating so much duck. Susy was retorting with some passion that she had not had more than her share, and over this dispute the two friends came almost to a quarrel.

Susy, however, had no wish not to keep on the sunny side of Miss Ermengarde's affections, and as her momentary irritation had cooled down, she very soon changed the subject. Once

more she administered broad flatteries; and impressed upon Ermengarde the fact that she was a long-suffering and ill-used martyr.

"I wouldn't stand it," said Susy. "No, that I wouldn't. I ain't a lady like you, Miss Ermie, but I wouldn't stand what you do."

"What would you do, Susy? How would you help yourself?"

"What would I do? Well, I'd go to my pa, and I'd have a talk with him. I'd let him know that—obey that old horror of a governess?"

"You mustn't speak about her like that, really, Susy."

"Miss, I'm open; that's what I am. I says what I means, and when I see a poor dear put upon, and treated worse than a baby, and punished as if we were back in feudal ages, I say that the one who does it is a horror. You think the same, Miss Ermie, though you're too proud to say it."

"We don't express ourselves in that way in our class," said Ermengarde, with a slow distinguished sort of smile which always abashed Susy. "Yes, Miss Nelson is very suitable with the children, but I do think I am beyond her. I am old for my years, and no one can call fourteen young."

"It's a noble age, miss," said Susy, in a tone

of rapture. "I'm only twelve, but I aspires to fourteen continual."

"Oh, you," said Ermengarde. "You're different: girls in your class don't come out. You are not presented, you have no future. It is quite a different matter with me. I shall be in society in a few years at latest. What I should like my father to do is——"

"To send you to a select seminary, miss—I know!"

"You don't know, Susan. A select seminary! the very word is vulgar. No: I should like my father to allow me to pursue my own education under the control of masters who are specialists in each branch."

"Miss, you talk very learned."

Susan suppressed a yawn, and going to the window looked out.

"I know what I'd do," she said. "I'd pay that fine lady governess of yours out. It would be tit for tat with me. Couldn't you do something as would put her in a fret, Miss Ermie?"

"I don't know what to do," said Ermengarde. "Miss Nelson is not easily fretted."

"Well, I'd find a way. Certainly I'd do something; see if I wouldn't."

"Hush!" said Ermengarde. "Listen! What is that?" She put her head out of the window.

Susy prepared to follow her example, but Ermie pushed her back.

"I hear Basil's voice," she said. "They are coming back—yes, they are all returning. Susy, you had better get into the cupboard. Hide as fast as you can. Miss Nelson is certain to come up here the very first thing. O Susy, do get into the cupboard at once! I shall be ruined if you are discovered up here."

Ermengarde's tone had risen to one of piteous entreaty. Susy, a little loath—for she could scarcely believe that her fun was so nearly over—was dragged and almost pushed into the cupboard. When she had got her captive, Ermengarde took the precaution to lock the cupboard door and put the key in her pocket.

"Oh, Miss, don't go away and leave me locked in," called the poor prisoner through the key-hole. "Don't you go a-forgetting of me, Miss Ermie, or I'll be found a muddled skeleton here, by and by." Susy's tone was tearful, and Ermie's piteous entreaties to her to hush were scarcely listened to. Footsteps were heard coming down the corridor.

"She's coming! I shall be betrayed. Do be quiet, Susy!" whispered Ermengarde in an agony.

At that moment the room door was unlocked, and Miss Nelson came in.

"I thought I heard you talking to some one, my dear," she said.

"I was only repeating some poetry over" said Ermengarde, raising her delicate brows.

She hated herself for telling this lie. She had yet to learn that one act of deceit must lead to another.

"I am glad you are improving your mind, Ermie," said the governess.

She went up to the little girl, took one of her cold hands, and kissed her.

"Well, my dear, we have all come back, and on your account. Basil pleaded very hard for you. He certainly is a dear fellow: I don't wonder you love him, my dear. He pleaded for you, Ermengarde and I—my love, I have yielded to his request. I have come back to say that I forgive you, Ermie. You will try to obey me in future, my dear child, and this punishment, owing to Basil's intercession, may be considered at an end. We are all going to have tea in the hay-field, and you are to join us there. Run up to your room, dear, and put on your brown holland frock. I will wait for you here. Kiss me, Ermie, before you go."

Ermengarde went up to her governess. She went slowly, for she had the greatest possible difficulty in keeping her tears back. But for Peg's presence in the cupboard this sudden

forgiveness and deliverance would have set her dancing for joy. As it was, her heart felt like lead, and she hated herself for her meanness.

"Kiss me, Ernie," said Miss Nelson. "There, my child. My dear, you need not look down hearted any more. I was obliged to punish you, but I don't think you will willfully and deliberately disobey me again. Cheer up now, Ermengarde: the past is past. You must ask God to give you strength to do better in the future, my dear. And—one thing—I want you to believe in my love, Ernie; I don't show as much. It is one of my trials that I can't show all that I feel, but—your mother's child is beloved by me, Ermengarde."

"Oh, don't speak of mother," said Ermengarde, with a little sob. She rushed out of the room. When she came back her governess was standing by the window.

"I cannot make out what I did with the key of my cupboard," she said. "I thought I left it in the door."

"Perhaps you have it in your pocket," said Ermengarde.

"No, I have felt in my pocket. Well, we can't wait now. The children will be starving for their tea. I promised to show Basil some photographs which I have in the cupboard, but they must wait for another time. Come, Ermengarde."

CHAPTER V.

LOCKED IN THE CUPBOARD.

PUNISHMENT has many degrees, and the sense of humiliation which Ermengarde felt, when that morning she had been left prisoner in Miss Nelson's sitting-room, was nothing indeed to the agony which she endured when, supposed to be free and pardoned, she walked with her governess to the hay-field.

Every moment she expected to hear Susy's piercing yells following her. Susy was a child with little or no self-control. She hated dark rooms; her imagination was unhealthy, and fostered in her home life in the worst possible way. Ermengarde knew that she could hear Miss Nelson's conversation, and every moment she expected her voice to arise within the cupboard in protest.

When no sound came, however, a dreadful idea took possession of poor Ernie's brain. The cupboard was not large; suppose Susy had been suffocated. This terror became so insupportable that several times the miserable child was

on the point of confessing all. What kept her back from doing this was the thought of Basil. While the ghost of a chance remained she must avert the possibility of Basil looking down on her. For Basil to despise her would have been the bitterest cup which life at present could hold out to poor Ermengarde.

Miss Nelson and her pupil reached the hayfield, and then ensued a scamper, a rush. Marjorie, Eric, Basil, Lucy, all crowded round their sister. They were unfeignedly delighted to have her with them, and Ernie could not but reflect how happy she would now be but for Susy.

"We are going to have such a time," said Marjorie. "After tea we are going to build a hayrick, quite in a new way. It's to be hollow inside, like a room, and pointed at the top, with a hole to let the air in, and why, what's the matter, Ernie? You look as white as anything. We thought you'd be so fresh, for you have done nothing all day. Now, I am tired, if you like. Oh, haven't I run?"

Marjorie stopped talking to mop her heated forehead.

"But it was glorious fun," she began the next minute. "I thought Eric would have capsized the boat, he laughed so. Only Basil was a bit mopy. He's not half himself when

you're away, Ernie. Now, hadn't you better sit down? You do look white."

Ernie cast a glance round her. At that moment she and Marjorie were a few feet away from the others. Basil was trotting meekly up and down with a small sister aloft on each broad shoulder. Eric was sending all the small fry whom he could reach into screams at his supernaturally exuberant wit and spirits. Miss Nelson went over to help nurse to get the tea ready. For a brief moment the two sisters were alone.

In an instant Marjorie would be called. She was never long left to herself in any group. Ernie had not a second to lose. She clasped Marjorie's hand convulsively.

"Maggie, I want you to help me."

"Of course I will, Ernie. What is it? Coming, Eric! What's the matter, Ernie?"

"Can't you get those children away for a minute."

"Maggie, Maggie, Maggie!" shouted several voices, headed by Eric's.

"Coming, Eric. Keep back, all of you. I'm talking to Ernie for a minute. Now, Ernie, quick. What is it?"

"I want to go back to the house, without any one noticing. Help me to go back at once."

"How can I help you! How queer you look."

"O Maggie, it's so important! Don't question me. Only help me."

"Poor Ermie, you do look in a state!"

"And no one must know. Maggie, I did think you'd be clever enough to find an excuse for me. I trusted to you. Don't fail me, Maggie."

"Let me think," said Marjorie. "You'll come back again?"

"Yes, I won't be gone any time."

"I'll fly across to nurse. Stay where you are—I'll be with you again in a minute."

Marjorie ran across the hay-field, stooped down by old nurse's side, had a short and eager colloquy, and returned to Ermengarde.

"Ermie, nurse wants those rusks which baby always has with his tea. She says you'll find the box in the nursery cupboard. Will you fetch them in a hurry? Baby is so hungry."

"Oh, what nonsense!" said Basil, who had now come up. "The idea of sending Ermie! Where's the nursemaid?"

"Alice went to the house with another message. You had better go, Ermengarde; nurse is in a hurry."

"I don't mind going a bit," said Ermengarde. She looked ready to fly. Her lips were trembling.

"You look as tired as anything now, Ermie,"

said Basil. "I'll go, if it comes to that. Where are those wretched rusks to be found, Maggie?"

"You can't go, Basil. You are to light the fire for the gypsy tea."

"It's lighting."

"Well, it's going out again. I know it is: or the kettle is sure to boil over, or something. Do be on the spot, and let Ernie make herself useful for once in a way."

Ermengarde ran off: the tension of her feelings would permit of no further delay. She heard Basil scolding Marjorie as she hurried across the hay-field. Ermengarde had never run so fast in her life. What should she find when she got back to that sitting-room. Would Susy be dead? If so—— But her terrified thoughts would take her no further.

She was not a particularly active little girl, and her quick running soon deprived her of breath. Oh, what a distance lay between that hay-field and the house! At last the lawn was gained, then the gravel sweep, then the side-door. She could only totter upstairs, and by the time she reached Miss Nelson's room she was really almost fainting.

She managed to stagger across to the cupboard, unlocked it, and then sank down in a chair. Susy instantly made her appearance;

she was not dead, but she was extremely red in the face and very angry.

"You did serve me a trick, Miss Ermie! Oh, my word, I didn't think as you'd treat me as bad as that! Why, I might have been—I thought I was to be suffocated, miss."

"Never mind now," said Ermengarde. "I'm ever so sorry; I——" Her voice faltered. In her relief and thankfulness at finding Susy alive and well, she went up to the little girl and kissed her. Then she burst into tears.

"Miss Ermie!"

If Susan Collins was fond of anyone, it was Ermengarde.

"Don't you take on, miss," she said affectionately.

Ermie's tears touched her so much that she felt she would have endured another half-hour of the cupboard to help her.

"Don't cry, please, Miss Ermie," said Susy. "I know you couldn't help yourself. I didn't want you to have a scolding; no, that I didn't; so it's all right, miss; I'm none the worse. I was a bit choky in the cupboard, but I'm as well as ever now."

Ermengarde soon dried her tears.

"I must go back to the hay-field at once," she said. "I'll leave you now, Susy. Don't be long here. Run downstairs while there's no

one about. Good-by, Susy. I'm glad you are not hurt."

Ermengarde nodded to Susan Collins, and with a light heart left the room. She went to the nursery, scoured the baby's rusks, and returned to the hay-field.

During the rest of that evening no one seemed happier or laughed more often than Ermengarde. She thought herself safe, and it never occurred to her as possible that the doings of that day could ever be known.

CHAPTER VI.

A STOLEN TREASURE.

HEN Ermengarde left the room, Susy looked round her. She was a thoroughly comfortable young person: her nature had plenty of daring in it, and she was not prone to timidity. She was not much afraid of being caught, and she did not feel at all inclined to hurry out of the governess's room.

Susy was one of those unfortunate little mortals whose pretty face, instead of bringing with it a blessing, as all beauty ought, had quite the reverse effect upon her. It made her discontented. Like many other foolish little maids, she longed to have been born in a higher station than Providence intended; she longed to be rich and a lady.

Susy was an only child, and her mother, who had once been a lady's-maid, always dressed her neatly and with taste. Susy spoke with a more refined accent than most children of her class: her dress, too, was better than theirs; she thought a very little would make her what she most desired

to be, a lady. And when Ermengarde began to take notice of her, she felt that her ambition was all but fulfilled.

Ernie had often met Susy in the grounds, and, attracted by her beautiful little face, had talked to her, and filled the poor child with conceit. Mr. Wilton had once seen Ermengarde and Susy chatting in a very confidential manner together. He at once separated the children, told Ernie she was not to make a friend of Susan Collins, and told Susan Collins that she was to mind her place, and go back to her mother. These instructions he further communicated to Miss Nelson and to Susan's father. The children were forbidden to speak, and Ermengarde, proud, rebellious, without any real sense of right or honor, instantly contrived to evade her father's commands, and saw more of Susy than ever.

Not until to-day, however, had Susan Collins been inside Wilton Chase. Over and over she had longed to see the interior of what her mother was pleased to call the 'noble pile.' But not until to-day had this longing been gratified. In a most unexpected way she at last found herself at the Chase. She had enjoyed a good dinner there. That dinner had been followed by nearly an hour of great misery and terror. Still, she had been there, and she

reflected with pride that, in consequence, she could now hold up her head higher than ever.

She was certainly not in a hurry to go away. Miss Nelson's room seemed a magnificent apartment to Susy. She was sure no one could come into it at present, and she walked round and round it now, examining its many treasures with a critical and somewhat envious spirit.

Once again, in the course of her wanderings, she came opposite the picture of the old-fashioned child the child whose hair was curled in primitive and stiff ringlets, whose blue eyes looked out at the world with a somewhat meaningless stare, and whose impossible and rosy lips were pursed up in an inane smile.

Susy gazed long at this old-world portrait. It was set in a deep frame of blue enamel, and inside the frame was a gold rim. Susy said to herself that the picture, old-fashioned though it was, had a very genteel appearance. Then she began to fancy that the blue eyes and the lips of the child resembled her own. She pursed up her cherub mouth in imitation of the old-world lady. She smiled into the pictured eyes of the child of long ago.

In short Susy became fascinated by the miniature; she longed to possess it. With the

longing came the temptation. Why should she not take it? The theft, if it could be called by such an ugly name, could never be traced to her. Not a soul in the place would ever know that she had been shut up in Miss Nelson's room. Only Ermengarde would know, and Ermie would not dare to tell.

Susie looked and longed and coveted. She thought of the pleasure this picture would give her in her own little bed-room at home. How she would gaze at it, and compare her face with the face of the old-fashioned child. Susy hated Miss Nelson, and if that good lady valued the picture, she would be only the more anxious to deprive her of it.

Miss Nelson had often and often snubbed Susy: she had also been cruel to Ermengarde. Susy could avenge Ermie as well as herself, if she took away the miniature.

Susan was not the child long to withstand any sudden keen desire. She stretched up her hand, lifted the little miniature from its hook on the wall, and slipped it into the pocket of her pink frock.

Its place looked empty and deserted. Susy did not want its loss to be discovered too soon. She looked around her, saw another miniature on the mantelpiece; without waiting even to look at it, she hung it in the place where the

child's picture had been, and then, well pleased, turned to go. First of all, however, she performed an action which she thought particularly clever and praiseworthy.

Poor Ermengarde had left the cupboard open when she rushed from the room, but Susy took the precaution to lock it, and taking out the key, threw it carelessly on the floor behind a chair. Then, satisfied that she had done her best both for Ernie and herself, she left Miss Nelson's room, running fearlessly down the now deserted back-stairs, and out into the courtyard.

She went round to the laurel bush behind which she had concealed her basket of eggs, picked it up, delivered its contents to the cook, and ran home singing a gay song.

Her mother remarked on Susy's long absence, but when the little girl said she had been tempted to linger in the meadows, Mrs. Collins did not question her any further. She hastened to prepare an extra good tea for her darling, for of course Susy's dinner with Ermengarde could not be mentioned.

Meanwhile all went merrily in the hay-field. Eric excelled himself in his rare power of story-telling. Basil and Ernie sat side by side, and whispered together. Miss Nelson had seldom seen a softer look on her elder

pupil's face than now. She determined that Basil and his sister should be together as much as possible during the holidays.

Presently the little ones went home, and by and by the elder children followed their example. Miss Nelson saw that Marjorie was tired—that Ernie, too, looked pale—and she made them both go to bed early.

It was rather late when the governess returned to the schoolroom. She only went there to fetch one of her pupils' exercise-books, but seeing Basil reading on one of the sofas, she stopped to talk to him. She was a very direct person, and in conversation she always went straight to the point.

"It is a great comfort to me to have you at home, Basil," she said.

Basil looked up at her. Then he dropped his book and started to his feet.

"Won't you sit down?" he said politely.

"No, I am going into my own room directly. I repeat that I am glad you are at home, Basil. There was a talk of your going north instead, was there not?"

"Yes. Uncle Charlie wanted me to fish with him."

"It is on Ermengarde's account that I am glad," pursued the governess.

Basil nodded.

"I came back on account of Ermie," he said. Then he colored, and added quickly, "But I like being at home best."

"Yes, my dear boy, I understand. You are unselfish. You and Marjorie are remarkably unselfish. Basil, you have a great influence over your eldest sister: oh yes, I can see. In many respects Ermengarde is a difficult child; I want you to use your influence well, and — Will you come into my room, Basil?"

Basil picked up his book. Of course he would go. He did not want to: he thought it was rather fudge talking about his influence; and as to his being unselfish he liked his own way as well as any one else. Had he not almost blubbered about not going to Scotland, and although he had thought of Ermie, still he had given up his desires with a pang. He hated Miss Nelson to think better of him than he deserved, but he did not know how to explain himself, and he followed her in rather a limp fashion into her private sitting-room.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, when he got there, "what a tiny room! Do they put you off with this? Oh, I say, I call it a shame!"

Miss Nelson loved her private sitting-room, and hated to hear it abused. She also particularly disliked the expression with which Basil had commenced his speech.

"I don't wish to interfere, my dear boy, but those words—you will excuse me—I am shocked."

"Do you mean 'by Jove'?"

"You must not repeat the expression. It sounds like a calling upon false gods."

"Oh, I say, all our fellows do it."

"Does that make it right?"

Basil sighed, and wished himself back in the schoolroom.

"You were going to speak about Ermie," he said.

Miss Nelson seated herself by the open window. It was a warm and very beautiful summer's night. A gentle breeze came in, and fanned the governess's tired brow.

"What about Ermie?" said Basil. He wanted to get back to his work, and to the unrestraint of the dear old schoolroom.

"I think you have a good influence over [illegible]," said Miss Nelson, raising her face to his.

"Yes, yes," he answered impatiently; "more than one person has said that to me. I have a good influence, but why should I have a good influence? I mean, why is it necessary? Ermie isn't worse than other people. It sounds as if you were all abusing her when you talk of my good influence. I hate humbug. I'm

no better than other fellows. I'm fond of Ernie, I suppose, and that's about the beginning and end of my influence."

"Exactly," said Miss Nelson. She was not listening to all the boy's words. Her thoughts were far away.

"Ernie is difficult," she began. Then she stopped and uttered an exclamation.

"Look, Basil, is that a key at your feet?"

Basil stooped, and picked up the key of Miss Nelson's cupboard.

"Put it in the lock of the cupboard behind you, my boy. I am glad it is found—really glad. I thought I could not have put it away. And yet Emmingarde seemed so sure that it was not in the lock when she was in the room."

"Oh, it fell out, I suppose," said Basil. He was not interested in the key, and he stood up now, prepared to go.

"Those photographs I spoke about are in the cupboard, Basil. I could not bring them to you because I could not find the key. Would you like to see them now?"

"Thanks," said Basil. "Perhaps, if you don't mind, I had better look at them by daylight."

When Basil said this, Miss Nelson also stood up. He looked at her, being quite sure now she would wish him good-night and let him go. Her eyes had a peculiar, terrified, staring expression

She rushed to the mantelpiece; then she turned and grasped the boy's arm.

"Basil," she said, "the picture is gone!"

"What picture?" he asked. He was really frightened at the anguished expression in Miss Nelson's matter-of-fact face.

"Mine," she answered, clasping his hand tighter. "My treasure, the picture of my——" here she broke off. "It is gone, Basil—see, and another put in its place! My miniature is gone! it has been stolen!"

"No, no," said Basil. "It couldn't have been. People don't steal pictures at the Chase. There are no thieves. Let me look for it for you."

"My miniature—my portrait. I don't speak of it—I can't!" Her voice shook. "No, no: it is gone. You see, Basil, it always hung here, and now another has been put on the same hook. That shows that the deed was intentional: the miniature is stolen!"

She sat down and clasped her hands over her face; her thin long fingers trembled.

"I'm awfully sorry for you," said Basil. He could not understand such emotion over any mere picture, but he had the kindest of hearts, and distress of any sort always moved him.

"I'm awfully sorry," he repeated.

Miss Nelson looked up at his tone.

"Basil," she said, "when you have very few

things to love, you value the few intensely. I did—I do. You don't know, my boy, what it is to be a lonely woman. May you never understand my feelings. The miniature is gone; it was stolen, purposely."

"Oh, we'll find the thief," said Basil. "If you are sure the picture was taken, we'll make no end of a fuss, and my father will help. Of course you must not lose anything you value in this house. You shall have it back; we'll all see to that."

"Thank you, Basil; I'm sure you'll do your best."

Miss Nelson's face looked as unhappy as ever.

"You must try and cheer up, Miss Nelson," said the school-boy. "You shall have your picture, that I promise you."

Miss Nelson was silent for a minute.

"Perhaps I shall get it back," she said after a pause. "But it won't be the same to me again. No, nothing can be the same. I've got a shock, Basil. I have worked for you all. When your mother died, I came—I came at her request. A more brilliant governess could have taught your sisters, but I can truly say no one more conscientious could have ministered to them, and no one on the whole could have loved them more faithfully. I have, however,

been misunderstood. Only one of your sisters has responded to me. Marjorie has been sweet and true and good; the others—not that I blame little Lucy much—a child is always led by her elders—but——"

"What does all this mean?" said Basil, almost sternly. He knit his brows. He felt that he was going to be somebody's champion, and there was fight in his voice.

"This is what it means, Basil," said Miss Nelson, "I am sorry to pain you, but I believe Ermengarde has taken my miniature."

"Ernie a thief? What do you mean? She's my sister—she's a Wilton! How can you say that sort of thing, Miss Nelson? No wonder poor Ernie does not quite get on with you."

"She never gets on with me, Basil. She is disobedient, she is unresponsive. I have taken more pains for her than for the others. To-day I was obliged to punish her for two offenses of a very grave character. She took my miniature out of revenge; I am sure of it."

"No, I am certain you are mistaken. You have no right to accuse her like this."

"I wish I could think I was mistaken, Basil, but all circumstances point to the fact that Ermengarde in revenge took away my portrait. I locked her into this room as a punishment, as a severe punishment for a most grave offense.

she was very angry and very defiant. The picture was in its usual place when I locked her into the room. She spent the greater part of the day here. When I come here to-night the portrait has been exchanged for another."

"Yes; your room has been empty for hours. Some one else has come in and done the thing, if indeed it has been done at all."

"What do you mean? The picture is gone!"

"The housemaid may have been dusting, and put another in its place."

"No, Basil, the housemaid would not touch my private possessions; I dust them and arrange them myself. I dusted my miniature only this morning, and the white rosebud and tuberhair I placed under it. I always put fresh flowers under my portrait; I did so to-day as usual. No, as you say, there are no thieves at Wilton Chase. Bessie has taken the miniature out of revenge. She knew I valued it."

"You are mistaken," said Basil, "and I think you are cruel!"

He left the room in a great rage

CHAPTER VII.

A GOOD, BOYISH SORT OF GIRL.

THE next day was Saturday. The lessons done this morning by Ermengarde, Marjorie, and Lucy were little more than nominal. A master came to give the little girls instruction in music at eleven o'clock, and after their half-hour each with him, they were considered free to spend the rest of the day as they pleased.

Rather to Basil's surprise Miss Nelson said nothing whatever to Ernie about the loss of her miniature. The governess's face was very pale this morning, and her eyes had red rims round them, as though she had wept a good deal the previous night. She was particularly gentle, however, and Basil, who alone knew her secret, could not help being sorry for her.

He was still angry, for he thought her idea about Ermengarde both unjust and cruel; but her softened and sad demeanor disarmed him, and he longed beyond words to give her back the miniature.

Ermie was in excellent spirits this morning. She thought herself well out of yesterday's scrape, and she looked forward to a long and happy afternoon with her brothers. She was particularly bright and attentive over her lessons, and would have altogether won Miss Nelson's approval, had not her sad mind been occupied with other matters.

Marjorie was the first to go to her music lesson this morning. She returned from it at half-past eleven, and then Ermengarde went to receive Mr. Hill's instructions.

Basil was stunning in the passage, sharpening a lead pencil as she passed.

"I'll be free at twelve, Basil," she called to him. "Where shall I find you?"

"I'll be somewhere round," he replied, in a would-be careless tone. "Maggie, is that you? I want to speak to you."

He seemed anxious to get away from Ermengarde, and she noticed it, and once more the cloud settled on her brow.

"Come out, Mag: I want to speak to you," said Basil. "You are free at last, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes: I'm free. What were you so chuffy to Ermie, for? You seemed as if you didn't care to have her with you!"

"Oh, don't I care? I'm thinking of her all the time. It's about her I want to speak to

you, Maggie. But, first of all, have you heard of Miss Nelson's loss?"

"No, what loss?"

"Some one has taken a miniature out of her sitting-room."

"A miniature? Which—which miniature? Speak, Basil."

"You needn't eat me with your eyes, Maggie. I don't know. I didn't do it!"

"Oh, no; but what miniature is it, Basil?"

"I tell you, I didn't see it, Maggie. It hung over her mantelpiece, and she kept flowers under it. She seemed to prize it a great lot."

"Not the picture of a rather silly little girl with blue eyes and a smile. Not that one? Don't tell me it was that one, Basil."

"Then you do know about it. I suppose it was that one. She was in an awful state."

"No wonder. Oh, poor Miss Nelson!"

"Do talk like a reasonable being, Maggie. What was there so marvelously precious in the picture of a silly little girl?"

"Yes, but *that* silly little girl was her own—not her child, but her sister, and she loved her beyond all the world, and—the little sister went to the angels. Once she told me about her—only once. It was on a Sunday night. Oh, poor Miss Nelson!"

"Well, don't cry, Mag—she must have the picture back. She has got a horrid thought in her head about it, though."

"A horrid thought? Miss Nelson has a horrid thought? Oh, Basil, don't you begin to misunderstand her."

"Shut up!" said Basil. "Who talks about my misunderstanding her? She has got a wrong notion into her head about Ernie, that's all. She thinks Ernie took the miniature out of revenge. There! Is not that bad enough? Now, what's the matter, Maggie? You are not going to tell me that you think Miss Nelson is right?"

"No," said Marjorie, shaking her fat little self, after an aggravating habit of hers when she was perplexed. "Of course I don't think anything of the kind, still——" She was remembering Ernie Arde's agitation of the day before—that almost frantic wish to return alone to the house.

Marjorie grew puzzled as this memory came over her.

"Well, don't cry, Mag!" said Basil. "Miss Nelson must get back her miniature."

"Of course she must, Basil."

"She believes that Ernie took it."

"Yes; of course she is mistaken."

"She is very positive."

"Oh, that's a way of hers. She's quite obstinate when she gets an idea into her head."

"A fixed idea, eh?" Basil laughed.

Marjorie did not join in the laugh. She was feeling intensely solemn.

"Miss Nelson is very angry, and in dreadful trouble," Basil went on presently. "I quite thought she would speak to Ermingarde this morning."

"She has not said a word, Basil."

"I know that."

"Basil, let me speak to Ermie."

"But now, you're not going to promise her, or any rubbish of that sort, Maggie?"

"As if I would, Basil!"

"Then I wish you would speak to her. I'm [illegible] about the whole thing. I can tell you. I hate [illegible] thoughts of Ermie."

"I'll tell her," said Marjorie quickly. "I'll tell her the miniature is lost."

She ran on, and Basil took another pencil out of his pocket and began to sharpen it. He did not like the aspect of affairs at all. His interview with Marjorie had given him no real satisfaction. Marjorie had not thrust the idea of Ermie's guilt from her with the horror he had expected. Of course she had agreed with him, but not with that emphasis he had desired.

He felt rather sickened. If Ermengarde could be mean and shabby, if by any possibility, however remote, Ermengarde had stooped to theft for the sake of a petty and small revenge, then he was very sorry he had not gone to Scotland, that was all. He'd give up Ermie if she was that kind, but of course she wasn't. It was horrid of him to lend even half credence to such a belief. He would go and have a game of cricket with Eric, and get such a monstrous idea out of his head.

When they were preparing for dinner, Marjorie told her sister about the stolen miniature. She told the story in her own characteristic way. She was determined to take no unfair advantage of Ermie, and so, while washing her hands, and purposely splashing the water about, and with her back so turned that she could not get a glimpse of Ermie's face, she burst forth with her news. When she turned round, Ermengarde was calmly combing out her long hair.

"It's dreadful, isn't it?" said Marjorie.

"Dreadful," echoed Ermengarde, but her voice did not sound excited.

"And she was so fond of that little sister," continued Marjorie.

"I never heard of any sister," said Ermengarde in a profoundly uninterested voice. "Let

to come down to dinner, Maggie; the gong has sounded."

Marjorie gave vent to a very heavy sigh. She had got no satisfaction out of Emmeraude, and yet her manner gave her a sense of insecurity. She resented again Eraie's strange excitement of the morning to-day, and wondered in vain what it all meant.

At dinner-time Miss Nelson's face was paler than ever. It was noticed now by the three people who shared her secret. Eric and Lucy were perfectly comfortable and easy in their minds, but the older children felt a sense of constraint. After dinner Eric asked Marjorie to come with him to visit his ferrets.

"They are at Collins's, you know," he said. "I hope Collins is treating them properly. If he does not, Stark will pay him out: that's a certainty. Come along, Mag."

"I will presently," said Marjorie.

"Oh, no; you must come at once. I have a lot to do this afternoon; you can't keep me waiting."

A good-humored smile played over Marjorie's sunny face. "Other people have a good deal to do too," she said. "I'll come soon, Eric. You can wait for me outside. I won't keep you long; but I have something *important* to do first."

Eric went away feeling very cross. If

Marjorie took to giving herself airs, the world might as well stop at once. What use was Marjorie except to be at everybody's beck and call; and more especially at his—Eric's—beck and call. He kicked his heels into the gravel, thrust his hands into his trousers pockets, and put on all the airs of an ill-used mortal.

Meanwhile Marjorie, whose important business was to her round face look intensely solemn, was trotting down the corridor to Miss Nelson's sitting-room. She guessed that she would find the governess there. To her gentle little tap Miss Nelson replied at once, and the little girl came in and stood before her.

"What is it, Marjorie?" said her governess. "Have you anything to say to me? I am busy. Why don't you go out with your brothers?"

"I wanted to give you a kiss," said Marjorie, "and to tell you—to tell you that if the other little girl loved you, so do I. I thought I'd tell you; I know it won't be a real comfort, but I thought perhaps you ought to know."

"It is a real comfort, Marjorie," said Miss Nelson in a softened voice. "Give me the kiss, dear. Thank you, my love. You are a good child, Marjorie—a dear child. Now run away and play."

"You have a headache, I know," said Marjorie, "and see how the sun does stream in

at this window. May I pull down the blinds? And will you lie on the sofa? Do, and I will bathe your head with eau de Cologne. I wish you would let me."

"No, dear, the others are waiting for you."

"Let them wait. Eric wants me to see his ferrets. I'd much rather stay with you."

Miss Nelson knew that Marjorie adored Eric, and that whatever pets of his happened to be in vogue had the strongest fascination for her. Nevertheless she did lie down on the sofa, and her little pupil's gentle hand felt all that was delightful and soothing as it touched her brow. When Marjorie stole out of the room, Miss Nelson had dropped asleep.

Eric was still waiting. He was amusing himself peeling an early autumn apple, eating it in a discontented sort of way, for he was not very hungry, and watching the windows for Marjorie to appear. He was delighted when he saw her, but he would not show his pleasure.

"Come on," he said, in a gruff voice. "I don't know why I waited for you. Half the evening is gone already. Do be quick, Mag; how you loiter!"

"I've an apple in my pocket for Shark," said Marjorie.

She tucked her hand comfortably through Eric's arm. She was feeling very sunshiny and

happy, and soon managed to bring back the ever-bubbling humor to the little boy's lips.

About a quarter of an hour later, a sort of bundle rolled rather than walked into the Collinses' neat little cottage. Mrs. Collins uttered an exclamation and darted forward. She did not at once recognize that the bundle consisted of Marjorie and Eric, who, with peals and bursts of laughter, had in this style intruded themselves into her modest dwelling.

"Let go, Mag, don't throttle me!" screamed Eric.

"Well, leave the apple in my pocket; I'm going to feed Shark."

Mrs. Collins conducted her two little visitors to the yard, where Shark and his companion ferret resided in their wire cage. Marjorie sank down in front of the cage, and gazed at the ferrets quite as long and as earnestly as Eric could desire.

"They are beautiful," she said at last. "More especially Shark."

Eric felt that if it were not undignified, he could have hugged his sister. They left the yard, and re-entered Mrs. Collins's house the dearest of friends.

They were going into the kitchen to beg for a piece of brown cake, which they knew Mrs. Collins could make to perfection, when, hearing

voices raised in dispute, Marjorie drew Eric back.

"Let's come another time for the cake," she whispered. "The passage-door is open, we can go out that way."

"Wait a second, Mag. I forgot to take a squint at Leo-ear. Just stay where you are, I'll be with you in a twinkling."

Marjorie stood still; Eric departed. The following words fell on Marjorie's ears:

"It's all very well to talk, Susy, but I'm quite sick of you and your mysteries, and I *will* know what you're hiding under your apron."

"I can't tell you, mother. It's a secret between Miss Ermengarde and me."

"Well, show it to me, anyhow. *I* don't mind your talking to miss, though the family make such a fuss about it. If it's anything she gave you, you might as well show it to your mother, Susy."

"Yes, she did give it to me; she gave it to me yesterday."

"Well, show it to me."

"No, no; that I won't."

"What is it? you might tell me that."

Marjorie distinctly heard Susy's pleased childish laugh.

"Oh, you'll never guess," she said; "it is so

pretty—all sorts of color, blue and pink and white, and—and—— But you *shan't* see, that you shan't."

Before Marjorie could hear more Eric hurried back.

"Now we'll have a game of cricket," he said to his sister.

Marjorie followed him without a word. She was a very good cricketer for a little girl, and she and Eric often had a jolly game together. The two went to the cricket field, and the game began.

On Eric's side it was vigorously played; but had Marjorie's arm lost its cunning? Her bowling went wide of the mark. Eric proposed that he should bowl, and she should bat. This made matters no better. Finally he stopped the game in disgust.

"You're awfully changed, Mag," he said, half between sorrow and anger. And then he marched out of the field. He felt an intense pity for Marjorie. "She always was a good, boyish sort of a girl," he said to himself, "but she's getting like the rest of them. Girls are a poor lot, and she's like the rest."

At another time Marjorie could not have borne to see Eric look at her sorrowfully. She took no notice now, however, but the moment her brother left the field, she turned on her own

heel, and went back to the Collinses' cottage. Mrs. Collins had gone out, but Susy was standing by the door. Susy wore a blue cotton frock to-day, and her curly hair was pushed back from her fair and pretty face. She was standing in the porch talking to the canary. He was pouring out a flood of song, and Susy was looking up at him, and trying to bring notes something like his from her rosy lips.

On ordinary occasions Marjorie, remembering the home mandate, would not have entered into any prolonged conversation with Susy. She forgot all this now in her eagerness and desire for information.

"Susy!"

"Yes, Miss Marjorie."

Susy had no particular love for Marjorie. Marjorie was downright in manner, plain in face, no flatterer. Susy came out of the cottage slowly, looking behind her, as she did so, at the singing canary.

"Come here, Susy, come quickly; I want to say something to you."

"Yes, Miss Marjorie, what is it?"

"What were you saying to your mother just now? I overheard you in the passage. What was it all about?"

"I don't remember, miss, I'm sure."

Susy's color had changed from red to white.

"Where were you, miss, when I was talking?" she said after a pause.

"I was in the passage, waiting for Eric. You must remember what you said. Your mother was asking you to show her something. Something you said Ermengarde had given you."

"Oh, I remember now, miss. Miss Ermie do give me things now and then."

"But you said she gave you this, whatever it was, yesterday."

"I couldn't have said yesterday, Miss Marjorie."

"You did, Susy; I heard you."

"I couldn't have said yesterday, really, miss."

"But you did, Susy; you said yesterday as plain as possible. You said 'she gave it to me yesterday'; those were your very words."

"I must have meant another day, miss: I'm careless in my words, often and often."

"What did she give you, Susy? Do tell me."

"Only a yard of blue stuff to make a frock for my doll."

"But how could a yard of blue stuff be pink and white and all sorts of colors?"

"Well, miss, I suppose I meant my doll.

She's pink and white enough. I'll show her to you, if you like, and then you'll believe me. Shall I run and fetch her to show you, miss?"

"Oh, if you are as sure as all that, you needn't trouble," said Marjorie.

She left the cottage without even waiting to bid Susy good-by. Eric was still lounging about, waiting for her, and Marjorie ran up to him, all her usual spirits once more shining in her face.

CHAPTER VIII.

FATHER'S BIRTHDAY.

THE great event of the year at Wilton Chase came in the summer. It came just at the time when all the children could enjoy it—when they were all at home and together.

This event was Mr. Wilton's birthday. It had been his custom, as long as any of the children could remember, to devote this day to them. He was their willing slave, their captive to do what they pleased with during the long hours of that summer day.

Aunt Elizabeth, who had a being brought into close contact with what she termed "undisciplined creatures," generally left the house for that occasion. The oak doors which divided the schoolroom from the grown-up portion of the building were thrown open, and happy rioters might have been seen darting about in all directions. In short, during this day Chaos reigned instead of order. Each child did as he or she liked best, with a reckless disregard to all future consequences.

In preparation for the feasting which went on during father's birthday, nurse was wont to see that all the useful unpleasant nursery bottles were well filled. She sent them to the chemist a week before, and when they were returned, put them grimly away in the cupboard.

"These," she would remark, "have nothing to do with father's birthday, but they come in handy the day after."

Miss Nelson also made preparations for the after effects of this day of unrestraint. She laid in a good store of clean manuscript paper, for she knew many impositions would have to be written, and she looked well through the poetry books and books of French selections, to see which on an emergency would be suited to the capacities of the delinquents, who would be certain to have to learn them amidst tears and disgrace.

The children's maid, too, laid in stores of buttons and hooks, and tapes and ribbons, for the repairing of the clothes which must come to grief in the general riot.

Thus all that the careful elders could do was done, but the children cared for none of these things. To the children the day itself stood before them in all its glory, and they gave no thought or heed to any after-time of reckoning.

Mr. Wilton's birthday arrived in the beginning of the second week of the summer holidays. The first exuberance of joy, therefore, at having the boys at home again, was past, and all the young folk could give themselves up to the ecstasy which the day itself afforded.

"Good-by, Roderick," said Miss Elizabeth Wilton to her brother. She came in in her neat traveling-dress, and surprised him over a late breakfast.

"Why, where are you off to?" he asked.

"Where am I off to? I'm going to town, of course."

"To town, in August! What do you mean, Lizzie?"

"You may well shrug your shoulders, and ask me what I mean. *You*, Roderick, are the cause. Your birthday comes to-morrow."

"Good gracious! And I had forgotten all about it."

"Well, the children remember it, and so do I. Good-by, Roderick. I'll be home again on Friday evening. I don't want to stay longer in that stifling London than I can help."

Miss Wilton took her departure, and Mr. Wilton stretched out his hand to the toast-rack, took a piece of toast which he absently broke in two, and once more buried his head in his *Times*. There were a good many interest-

ing items of intelligence this morning, and Mr. Wilton was a keen politician. Between him, however, now, and the absorbing interest of the paper, came the vision of to-morrow. To-morrow—his birthday, and the day when everything was turned topsy-turvy, and the children and Chaos reigned supreme.

Mr. Wilton was a very affectionate father, but no one must think the worse of him for shrinking at this moment from the ordeal which lay before him. When the day came, he would throw himself into the fun, heart and soul—he would be the life of the circus, the ringleader of the pleasure-seekers. He would do this, and he would enjoy himself, but in anticipation the prospect was not cheerful. He had forgotten all about his birthday; he had further made arrangements for to-morrow—he was to see a friend in the neighboring town; they were to lunch together, and discuss the autumn shooting. Afterward he had intended to ride some miles farther on and visit a lady, a certain Mrs. Gray, who had been a great friend of his wife's, and whom he had rather neglected of late. He had made all his plans; they were none of them vital, of course, and they could be postponed, but it was disagreeable to have to do this.

Mr. Wilton pushed his *Times* aside, rose from the breakfast-table and went out. He must

order his horse and ride over at once to Quarchester, and put his friend off. How ridiculous it would sound to have to say, "My dear Furniss, the young ones are celebrating my birthday to-morrow, so I can't come."

Mr. Wilton stood on the gravel sweep, called a groom, gave the necessary directions, and looked around him. He was glad none of the children were about—he did not want to discuss the birthday until he felt in a better humor. What a good thing the children were employed elsewhere!

Just then, however, he heard a shrill childish laugh, and the next moment little Lucy, hotly pursued by fat Marjorie, dashed into view. Lucy rushed up to her father, clasped her arms round his legs, and looked up into his face.

Marjorie paused up to her. "No, no, Lucy, you are naughty," she said. "It is wrong of you to run away like this and when Miss Nelson is so sad, too."

"Hello, Maggie, have you no word of greeting for me?" asked her father.

"Oh, father, I beg your pardon; I wanted to catch Lucy and bring her back to prayers. She's quite wild this morning; I expect it's because of the birthday being so near, but it does tease Miss Nelson so when the children don't come in quietly to prayers."

"Run into the house this moment, Lucy," said Mr. Wilton, in a tone which all the children immediately obeyed. "You stay, Maggie."

Lucy trotted off.

"Was I right in hearing you say, Maggie, that Miss Nelson was ill?"

"Not exactly ill, father, but she's fretting."

"Fretting? What about?"

Marjorie edged up to her father in the confidential way which made people take to her at once.

"It's her little sister's picture," she said. "A miniature, and it's—it's lost. It—it can't be found."

"I never knew Miss Nelson had a sister."

"Oh, yes; only she's dead—a dear little girl—she died a long time ago, and Miss Nelson is very fond of her miniature, and it's—it's lost!"

Just at this moment the groom appeared, leading Mr. Wilton's spirited bay mare.

"What a tragic face, Maggie," said her father, chucking her under the chin. "We must only trust that the picture is mislaid, not lost. Now, scramble, my dear, I am off to Quarchester."

As Mr. Wilton rode down the avenue he thought in a slightly contemptuous way of Marjorie's information.

"I do trust Miss Nelson is not too senti-

mental," he murmured. "Poor Maggie looked absolutely tragic over her governess's loss. I really was prepared to hear of some recent bereavement: but the loss of a miniature, and of course it is only mislaid! I do trust Miss Nelson is the right person to bring up a tender-hearted little thing like Maggie. Now, Ermengarde—— Hullo! there *is* Ermengarde!"

Yes, just ahead of him, and quite unconscious that she was observed, walked Ermengarde in close confabulation with Susan Collins.

Mr. Wilton's brow darkened as he saw the two together.

"This is absolute carelessness on Miss Nelson's part," he said to himself. "She knows my wishes, and it is her business to *see* that Ermengarde obeys. I must have a very serious talk with Miss Nelson when I return home this afternoon, but I have no time to attend to the matter now. If I don't hurry, I shall miss seeing Furniss."

Mr. Wilton galloped quickly away, found his friend at home, and in conversation with him forgot all home worries. He forgot them so absolutely that he accepted an invitation to spend the day and dine. In consequence it was near midnight when he returned to Wilton Chase, and the fact that to-morrow was his birthday again absolutely escaped his memory.

CHAPTER IX.

FIVE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING.

"MAGGIE, Maggie, wake up, I say!"

"Yes, who's there. I'm so sleepy. Oh, it's you, Eric. What do you want?"

"It's father's birthday, and the clock has just struck four. You promised you'd get up at four."

"Yes; but, oh dear me, I *am* so sleepy."

Marjorie yawned, and twisted about on her pillow.

"Are you sure it wasn't three that struck, Eric?"

"No, four; I counted the strokes. I thought you liked getting up early."

"So I do, but don't talk so loud, or you'll wake Ermie."

"Catch me wanting her to get up, cross old thing!"

"Eric, you are unkind, and Basil wouldn't like it."

"Bother Basil! what do I care? I say, Mag, are you going to pop out of bed?"

"I suppose so. Go outside the door and wait for me, Eric, and *do* be quiet."

Eric departed, whistling under his breath, and kicking his heels so restlessly that only the soundest sleeper could still remain in the land of dreams.

Marjorie rubbed her eyes, stretched herself, yawned, and finally, stimulated by threatening knocks of Eric's on the other side of the door, managed to tear herself away from her warm snug bed. She saw the sunlight streaming in through the closed window-curtains, but August though it was, this early hour of the morning was chilly, and Marjorie shivered as she tumbled not too tidily into her clothes. Eric would not give her time to take her usual cold plunge-bath, and she was decidedly of opinion that plans which looked delightful the night before are less alluring when viewed by the candid light of morning.

Marjorie was a hearty child in every way, hearty at work and at play, hearty, too, at sleep, and it was hard to be debarred of quite a third of her usual allowance. She dipped her face and neck, however, in cold water, which effectually woke her up, and when she had brushed out her thick hair, and knelt for a moment or two at her little bed to say her usual morning prayers, she felt quite cheerful.

and joined Eric with her usual sunny good-humored face.

"That's right," said Eric, clasping her hand. "Isn't the morning scrumptious? Not a bit o' a cloud anywhere. Now let's be off to wake father."

"To wake father! at four o'clock in the morning! What do you mean, Eric?"

"It's twelve minutes past four, if it comes to that," said Eric. "You were an awful time getting into your clothes, Mag. And why shouldn't we wake father? It's his birthday. He will like us to wake him!"

Marjorie, however, judging from her own too recent experience, thought differently.

"It really *is* too early," she said. "He wouldn't like it a bit, and why should we vex father because it's his birthday?"

"You forget that he never is vexed with anything we do on his birthday," said Eric. "It's our day, and we couldn't be scolded, whatever we did. *Do* come along, Maggie; I have it all planned so jolly. Father is to come with us, and unmoor the boat, and help us to gather the water-lilies. Do come on, and don't waste the precious time. I tell you, father will like it."

Marjorie was very unselfish, but she was also easily persuaded, particularly by her chosen

and special chum, Eric. Accordingly, after a little further demur, she consented to go with her brother to their father's room.

It was very still in the house, for not a servant as yet had thought of stirring. Eric pushed back the oak doors, which so effectually divided the nursery people from the grown ups.

"There you stay, you nasty things!" he said, looking them back with an air of great triumph. "This is our day, and you can't keep us prisoners. Come along, Mag. I've broken the prison-bars."

Marjorie's own spirits were rising fast. After all, it was delicious to be up in the early morning. She was glad she had taken the trouble to get out of bed now.

The children ran down the wide corridor from which the best bedrooms opened. They paused at length outside their father's door. Here Marjorie once again grew a little pale, but Eric, with a look of resolution, turned the handle of the door and went in.

Marjorie followed him on tiptoe. Father's room was very large, and to the culprits who stood just inside the door, looked solemn and awe-inspiring. Even Eric felt a little subdued: the chamber seemed so vast, and the great four-poster, away by itself in an alcove, had

a remote and unapproachable aspect. It was one thing to have a rollicking, merry, good-humored father to romp about with all day, and another to approach the solemn personage who reposed in the center of that bed.

"Let's come away," whispered Marjorie.

"Fudge!" retorted Eric. "It's father's birthday! It's *our* day! Come along—he can't be angry with us even if he wished."

Thus exhorted, but with many misgivings at her heart, Marjorie followed her brother across the big room and up the two steps which led to the alcove.

A picture of the children's mother hung over the mantelpiece. It was a very girlish picture, and represented a slim figure in a white dress, with a blue sash round her waist. The face was a little like Hermangarde's, but the eyes which looked down now at the two children had Marjorie's expression in them. There were other portraits of Mrs. Wilton in the house, later and more matronly portraits; but Marjorie liked this the best—the girlish mother seemed in touch with her youthful self.

"Do come away, Eric," she said again, and tears almost sprang to her eyes. It seemed cruel to wake father just to add to their own pleasure.

Eric, however, was not a boy to be lightly

turned from his purpose. He had very little sentiment about him, and had stern ideas as to what he termed his rights. Father's birthday was the children's lawful day; on that day they were one and all of them kings, and the "king could do no wrong."

Accordingly this little king, with a somewhat withering glance at his sister, stepped confidently up to the big bed, raised himself on tiptoe, so as to secure a better view, and looked down with his chubby expectant face on his slumbering father.

It is all very well for the little folk, who are in bed and asleep as a rule between eight and nine in the evening, to feel lively and lively, and quite up to any holiday pranks at four o'clock on a summer's morning; but the older and less wise people who sometimes do not close their eyes until the small hours are often just enjoying their deepest and sweetest slumbers about the time the sun likes to get up.

This was the case with Mr. Wilton. He had not arrived home until midnight; he had found some letters before him which must be replied to—he had even dipped into a book in which he was specially interested. Then his favorite spaniel Gyp had begun to howl in his kennel, and Mr. Wilton had gone out to see what was the matter.

So, from one cause or another, he had not laid his tired head on his pillow until between one and two o'clock in the morning.

Therefore Mr. Wilton was now very sound asleep indeed, and not Eric's buzzing whispers nor Marjorie's cautious repentant "Hush—hush, Eric!" disturbed him in the very least.

"How *lazy* of father!" pronounced Eric in a tone of withering scorn. "He has not even stirred. Oh, you needn't go on with your 'hush hush!' Mag he's as sound as a button. Look here, I must speak a little louder. Fa—ther! oh, I say, father, open your eyes!"

Eric's voice became piteous, but the eyes remained closed, the face peaceful and immovable.

"We might both of us jump on the bed at the same moment," said Eric. "That ought to shake him a good bit, and perhaps he'd begin to yawn. Oh, jolly, it's a spring mattress; we can give him a great bounce if we jump on together. Now then, Mag, be sure you jump when I do."

Marjorie, still looking rather terrified, but led on by Eric's indomitable spirit, did spring on the bed, and so heavily that she rolled on to Mr Wilton's leg. He started, groaned, said "Heavy, Gyp!" in a very angry voice, and once more pursued his way in dreamland, without

any idea that two little imps were perched each on one side of his pillow.

"It's too bad," said Eric. "The whole morning will go at this rate; it will soon be five o'clock. Oh, I say—pater—father—gov! do wake!"

"You shouldn't say pater or gov," said Marjorie. "Father doesn't like it."

"Much he cares! He doesn't hear anything. He's stone deaf—he's no good at all!"

"Well, we shouldn't say words he doesn't like, even if he is asleep," said Marjorie in her properest tones.

"I like that," said Eric. "And why mayn't I say pater, I wonder? Pater is the Latin of father. It's a much nicer word than father, and all our fellows say it. You think it isn't respectful because you're an ignorant girl, Maggie, but Julius Cæsar used to say pater when he was young, so I suppose I may."

"Father looks very handsome in his sleep," said Marjorie, turning her head on one side, and looking sentimentally at her parent.

"He doesn't," said Eric. "He looks much better with his eyes open. Oh, I say, I can't stand this! The morning will go, and we'll never get our water-lilies. Father, wake up! Father, it's your birthday! Don't you hear us? Here, Mag, let's begin to jump up and down

again on the bed. Couldn't you manage to hop on his leg by accident? You're heavier than me."

Marjorie and Eric joined hands, the fun entered into their souls, and they certainly jumped with energy.

Mr. Wilton began to have a very bad dream. Gyp, his favorite spaniel, seemed suddenly to have changed into a fiend, and to have seized him by the leg. Finally the dream dissolved itself into a medley of laughter and childish cries. He opened his eyes: two little figures with very red faces and very disordered hair were tumbling about on his bed.

"Eh—what? Is the house on fire?" he gasped.

"Oh, father! At last!" exclaimed Marjorie. She flung herself upon him, and began to kiss him all over his face.

"My dear child—very affectionate of you, no doubt, but why this sudden rush of devotion in the middle of the night?"

"I say!" exclaimed Eric in a voice of awful emphasis. "It's nearly five o'clock!"

"And it's your birthday," said Marjorie, beginning to kiss him again.

"Yes," continued Eric, "it's your birthday, father. *Our* day, you know."

The victim in the bed lay quite still for a

moment. That much grace he felt he must allow himself to recover from the shock of the announcement. Then he said, as cheerfully as he could speak, "What did you say the hour was?"

"Close on five o'clock—awfully late," answered both children, shouting their words into his ears.

"All right: what do you want me to do?"

"To get up at once, and come with us to gather water-lilies."

"Oh!"

"Isn't it a delightful plan?"

"Very. Are you sure the morning isn't wet?"

"The morning wet, father! The sun is shining like anything. Run to the window, Mag, and pull the blind up. Now you can see, can't you, father?"

"I can, thanks, Eric."

"Well, aren't you getting up?"

"I will, if you will both favor me by retiring into the corridor for five minutes. And listen, even though it is my birthday, it isn't necessary to have any more vic—— I mean, we need not wake the rest of the house."

"Oh, we'll be as quiet as mice," retorted Marjorie. "*Dear* father, you'll promise to be very quick?"

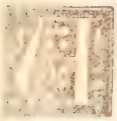
"*Dear* Maggie, I promise; I am your devoted and humble servant for the rest of the day."

"Isn't father delicious?" said Marjorie, as they waited in the passage.

"Delicious!" retorted Eric; "what a girl's expression! One would think you were going to eat him. I tell you what it is, pater ought to be very much obliged to us for waking him. He was lazy, but he'll have a time of it for the rest of the day."

CHAPTER X.

THE REIGN OF CHAOS.



COLD bath and a rapid toilet afterward effectually removed all traces of sleep from Mr. Wilton's eyes.

"I feel like a sort of knight putting on my armor," he said to himself. "I am going on a crusade for the rest of the day. A crusade against all my established customs, against all my dearly loved order, against my newspaper, my books, my quiet pleasant meals. Well, it is for the sake of the children: and their mother, bless her"—here he glanced at the picture of the girl over the mantelpiece—"would smile at me if she could. Oh, yes, I buckle on my armor cheerfully enough. Hey, for Chaos! Hey, for wild Mirth and childish Frivolity! Here I come, Eric and Maggie—poor patient little mice that you are! Here's father at last. Give me your hand, Mag: you may jump on my shoulder, if you like. Now for a race downstairs to the garden, and then you can tell

me what you got me out of my bed in the middle of the night for."

Miss Wilton was quite right when she left the Chase the day before. She certainly would not have enjoyed being awakened from her early morning slumbers by the wild raid which now took place through the old house. There was a scamper, a rush, some shouts, not only from childish throats, but from a manly and decidedly boss voice. The poor respectable old house would have looked shocked if it could, but who cared what anything looked or felt when Chaos was abroad?

About three hours later a somewhat draggled-looking party might have been seen approaching the Chase. They were all dead tired, and all very untidy, not to say disreputable in appearance. The little girl's brown Holland frock was not only torn, but smeared with mud and some sort of green mossy stuff which produces a deep stain very difficult for laundresses to remove. The little boy was also in a sorry plight, for he had a scratch across his cheek, and his knickers were cut through at the knees; while the big boy, in other words, the man, looked the most untidy, the most fatigued, the most travel-stained of all.

Ermengarde, in her neat white cool frock, with a green sash tied round her slim waist,

and her long fair hair streaming down her back, came out to meet this party. She was accompanied by Lucy, who was also neat and fresh and trim. The two had stepped out of the house to gather a few flowers to put on the breakfast-table, and now they assumed all the virtuous airs of those good moral people who do *not* get up to catch the early worm.

"*What* a figure you are, Maggie! and what a disgraceful noise you and Eric made this morning," she began, in her most grown-up and icy tones.

"Oh, please don't scold us, Ermengarde," said Mr. Wilton. "Look at our water-lilies, gaze well at them, and be merciful."

Yes, the water-lilies were superb—each jaded conqueror was laden with them—buds and blossom and leaf, all were there—*such* buds, such blossoms, heavy and fragrant with richness.

Ernie adored flowers. She uttered a little shriek of delight when her father held up a great mass of snowy, waxen balls for her to bury her face in.

"Oh, delicious!" she exclaimed, "but how tired you all are!"

"Yes, yes, yes," exclaimed Victor No. 1, "tired and starving—absolutely starving. Get us some breakfast, good Ernie, and put the lilies in water as quickly as you can."

Miss Nelson presided at the breakfast-table, and as this meal was eaten in the comfortable old schoolroom, and as Miss Nelson looked just as usual, just as orderly, just as neat and prim as she did yesterday, and as she would again to-morrow, her presence had a certain calming effect upon the rioters. They ate their meal with some decorum, and not more than three children spoke at the same moment.

There was a grand consultation immediately after breakfast as to the proceedings of the day, and here it must be confessed Cliff once more mounted his throne, and held a most despotic sway.

After ten minutes of babel, Marjorie suddenly squatted herself on the floor, and began to write furiously.

This was her programme: "Rush upstairs and dress as fast as possible—don't be long on account of keeping the carriages waiting. Put on our oldest, but we must be neat on account of father not liking dirty hands, and smuts on the top of the nose, and smears anywhere—we had better wear our best, perhaps. Tumble into the carts and carriages and wagons, and drive to Boo's Head, that's ten miles away. Cliff wants to go, the others don't: Lucy and I are for Salter's Point, on account of the shells, and that's in the other direction. I think it's

quite eleven miles. Ermengarde votes for the Deep Woods, although I hate midges. Well, we'll all go somewhere, and we'll take every scrap of food that the house holds, even if there is to be a famine afterward: well, perhaps we oughtn't to take every scrap, for the servants at home will be hungry, and we'll want supper ourselves; we'll be starving for it, I expect. Eric says the ferrets must come with us, for they ought to have fun like the rest of us on father's birthday, particularly Shark, who has a great sense of humor. Ernie is nearly crying, for she's afraid Shark will bite her, and Basil is winking at her, and trying to comfort her, and he's frowning at Eric with the other side of his mouth, and Eric is putting out the tip of his tongue when he thinks no one is looking at him, which is vulgar, even though it is father's birthday. What was I saying? I do get cramped and mixed, huddled up on the floor, scribbling. We're to go for a long drive, to Bee's Head, or somewhere, and the horses and the carriages and the servants and the ferrets and the children and father and all the food are to come too, and we are to have a great ball—no, that's in the evening—and supper, and the fireworks will go off. Dear, dear, where are the fireworks to be squeezed? it's a most confusing sort of day."

"Maggie!" suddenly exclaimed Basil.

She raised a flushed face.

"What are you doing, huddled up on the floor like a ball: and what's that queer squiggly bit of paper in your hand?—it looks all over hieroglyphics. Here, I must see!" he snatched at the paper, held it aloft, and read Marjorie's programme aloud amid the roars of the company.

"I was only trying to make what we said less confusing," answered Marjorie. "I was getting it down as hard as I could, and I said I was mixed: anyone else would have been mixed too, I think."

"I should rather think they would," said Basil. "So that's the nonsense we have been talking all this time. Thank you, Margie, for showing us ourselves. Now, sir," here Basil turned round and addressed his father. Mr. Wilton looked at him with the greatest admiration; he felt years younger than his son at the moment.

"Now, sir," proceeded Basil, "we cannot go to Bee's Head, and Salter's Point, and the Deep Woods all in the same morning, as the three places happen to be in totally different directions, and as each of them also happens to be from ten to twelve miles from here. We must make a choice and we must abide by it.

it's your birthday, father, and you ought to choose. Which shall it be?"

"Thank you, my boy, but I would not have the responsibility of a choice for the world—I don't feel equal to it. You young folks must make the selection among you."

"I'm for Bee's Head and the lighthouse!" screamed Eric; "there's a man at the lighthouse of the name of Bolster, and he promised to get me some crabs, and I know he'd like to have a good share at Shark. I'm for Bee's Head and the lighthouse; that's what I'm for!"

"I think the Deep Woods would be best," said Ermengarde. "It's sure to be grilling in the sun to-day, and I expect there'll be a good deal of dust, and the dust and the sun together do make your face feel so horrid and smarty. Don't they, Basil?"

"I don't know," said Basil, whose eyes were trying to interpret whether his father had any unspoken choice which might outvie his own.

"Whereas in the Deep Woods it will be deliciously cool and fresh," proceeded Ermengarde in her sedate tones.

"Think of the midges and the gnats!" exclaimed Marjorie. "Oh, I'd rather have the sun any day! Who cares whether we are

burnt or not? Now at Salters's Point there are such lovely shells, real cowries, and those little pointers, and those *sweet* little yellow sea-snail shells."

"Yes—yes—yes—I want to go to Salters Point!" exclaimed Lucy.

"Oh, the lighthouse is twice the fun," exclaimed Eric, "and I know Shark——"

"Once for all, father," exclaimed Ermengarde, "you are not going to allow that odious ferret to destroy the whole pleasure of our day? I do wish, father, you'd vote for the Deep Woods."

"Here comes Miss Nelson; she shall decide," answered Mr. Wilton. "No, Eric, my boy, Shark must stay at home. There! I have said it—no more words. Miss Nelson, please come and be our deliverer. These young people have divided ideas with regard to the locality for the great birthday picnic. Some vote for Bee's Head, some for Salter's Point, some for the Deep Woods—all cannot be pleased; you shall therefore make the choice. Where are we to go?"

All the anxious pairs of eyes were immediately turned on Miss Nelson. She quite blushed under their battery.

"Then—oh Bolton and the lighthouse!" exclaimed Eric. "Bolster has a tank where he

keeps his crabs alive. He can take us up the tower, too, and show us the lanterns."

"Think of the shade of the Woods," said Ermengarde.

"Oh, those cowrie and yellow snail shells!" sighed Marjorie.

Miss Nelson only caught these last words. She looked down into the pleading gray eyes of her favorite, and her choice was made.

"We will go to Salter's Point," she said.

Some hurrahs, accompanied by some groans, met her decision; but it was a satisfaction to have anything fixed, and the children rushed upstairs to prepare for the great picnic.

It was discovered that the large wagonette and the pony-carriage could accommodate the whole party, and accordingly, soon after eleven o'clock, they started in the highest possible spirits—even Miss Nelson casting away her mantle of care for the time, and Mr. Wilton, who had now thoroughly entered into the spirit of the fun, enjoying himself as much as the youngest child present.

It was a glorious day, the breeze was only fresh, and the dust, notwithstanding Ermengarde's fears, by no means excessive.

The little girl soon therefore got over her slight disappointment at Miss Nelson's choice not having been the same as her own. She

was seated by her favorite Basil's side, in the pony-carriage, the more riotous party, with Mr Wilton at their head, having elected to go in the wagonette.

Miss Nelson and two of the younger children sat opposite to Ermengarde and Basil. Ermengarde would rather have had another *vis-à-vis*, but as the governess devoted her whole time to amusing the two little ones, Ermengarde decided to take no notice of her, and to give herself up to the delights of Basil's conversation.

Basil was a boy who, with all his sunny and pleasant ways, had a very reserved nature. There were in reality two Basils: one with a kindly word, a joke, a light jest, an affectionate manner for each and every one he came across; the other was made of sterner stuff—grave, with deep thoughts and high aspirations, and very [illegible] about food ideas with regard to honor and [illegible]. But was the inner Basil, whose [illegible] Ermengarde knew of, with whom she adored, loved, admired, dreaded.

This Basil had a heart which could be wounded, and Ermengarde knew well that, if she caused that deep heart a pang, it might [illegible] its doors against her, and shut her out in the cold outside its affection and influence forever.

By superficial observers Basil was considered one of the most forgiving and the most easily pleased people in the house. But Ermengarde knew better. She knew things might happen which might make Basil a very stern and unrelenting young judge.

This morning, however, all was sunshine. Basil was in his sunniest humor. He would not talk all the time to Ermengarde, but gave Miss Nelson and the children enough of his conversation to make them feel in it all, and consequently in excellent spirits. But for his sister he had some tender gleams, and one or two allusions which no one understood but herself, for the brother and sister had spent happy birthdays like this in their mother's time, and they were both thinking of her to-day.

A part of the road which led to Salter's Point wound through the woods which lay at the back of Wilton Chase. There was plenty of shade, therefore, here, and Ermengarde lay back on her comfortable seat with a great feeling of rest and security. She almost forgot that miserable day which followed the boys' return from school; she even looked at Miss Nelson without being haunted by any sense of reproach. The governess's worn face looked quite peaceful and happy; and Ermengarde

hoped that she had really forgotten that tire-some old-fashioned miniature which had so mysteriously disappeared from her room. Ermie trusted that the stolen miniature would soon be forgotten, and she was fully convinced that her share in its disappearance would never be known.

The vinaigrette, with its two horses, had disappeared from sight, and the pony-carriage, drawn by the pretty Shetlands with their tinkling bells, was about to emerge through the park-gates, when there came a sudden interruption. This was caused by Collins, the head keeper, who stepped across the road, and touched his hat to the whole party, and to Ermengarde in particular.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Nelson," he said, addressing himself first of all to the governess, "but the fact is we are in a little bit of trouble at home, and the goodwife said if I stood here I'd be sure to see Miss Ermengarde passing, and she knew Miss Ermengarde would come to Susy, just for one minute, as she wants her so very badly."

On hearing these words Ermengarde turned as white that Miss Nelson thought she was going to faint. She started to her feet at once with a half-cry. "Oh, please let me go," she said quickly. Her hand shook; she would

have leaped out of the carriage had not Basil held her back.

"Sit quiet, Ermengarde," said her governess authoritatively. "Now, Collins, please explain why it is necessary that Miss Wilton should see your daughter at this inconvenient moment, when we are just on our way to Salter's Point: you are aware that Mr. Wilton has forbidden any intimacy."

"Oh, let me go: I won't keep you two minutes," said Ermie.

"Quiet, Ermengarde. Now, Collins, what does Susan want with Miss Wilton?"

Collins had a strongly-marked face, and it flushed now rather angrily.

"I can't say, I'm sure, miss," he said. "The poor child is all in a fluster, and as to Miss Ermengarde, poor Susy worships the very ground she walks on. You haven't, maybe, heard of the accident that has happened to her miss?"

Miss Nelson's manner became gentle at once. Ermengarde was about to burst forth with another exclamation: the governess laid her hand on the little girl's arm with a not unkind pressure. "One moment, Ermie. No, Collins, we have not heard of any accident. I sincerely trust your daughter has come to no harm."

"Well, miss, for the matter of that, Susy's life

ain't in danger, but she has broke her leg; a bad fracture, too, midway between the knee and the ankle. Poor child, she's for all like a boy in some of her ways, and she was climbing a tree to get a glimpse of me, she said, the rogue; and a rotten bough broke under her, and she came down right on her head. The poor thing was insensible when I took her up, miss, but she's better now, of course, and the leg was set by Doctor Reeves last night."

"Oh, do let me go to her," said Ermengarde; "what does a stupid picnic matter? Basil, won't you speak up for me. Do get Miss Nelson to let me go at once."

"Poor Daisy, she's feverish a bit," said Collins, favoring Ermengarde with a quick grateful glance, "and she have been crying out all the morning and half the night for missie. It was kind made the cute think of me standing here to watch, in case Miss Ermengarde might spare a minute or two from the day's pleasure to give to the poor child."

"I am sorry for you, Collins," said Miss Nelson; "and the story of the accident certainly alters matters a good deal. I do not think Mr. Wilton will object to Ermengarde's going to Susan for a moment."

"Thank you," said Ernie, with a great breath of relief.

"My dear child, you need not tremble so. Steady, you will fall on your face. Basil, help your sister out of the carriage. We will give you five minutes, Ermengarde. Collins, be sure you send for anything necessary for Susan to the Chase."

Collins touched his hat and withdrew. Ermengarde had already flown down a little path which led directly to the keeper's little cottage.

"Poor child, I did not know she was so sensitive," said Miss Nelson to Basil. He was standing by the side of the carriage, and she thought he had not heard her remark, for he turned his head away.

Meanwhile Ermengarde, having reached the cottage, was promptly taken upstairs to Susy's little attic-room by her mother.

The poor little girl had gone through a night of dreadful suffering, and at another time her flushed face and feverishly bright blue eyes would have excited Ermengarde's pity, and she would have been as gentle and sympathetic in her manner as heart could wish. The influence of fear, however, and the consciousness of wrongdoing, have a wonderfully hardening effect upon the best of us, and Ernie only waited until Mrs. Collins's back was turned to say crossly: "What did you mean by sending

for me in that fashion, Susy? and after what I said to you yesterday. I do think you have no consideration! I got a horrible fright when your father came up, and asked point-blank for me, and before Miss Nelson, too!"

The harsh words made Susy cry.

"I'm dreadful bad," she said, her pretty lips quivering. "Oh, Miss Ermie, don't look at me like that. I did think you'd have been sorry for me, and when I always set such store by you, miss."

"Of course I'm sorry for you, Susy, but I really can't stay now, or they'll remark it. If you want me very badly, I'll try and slip up here one evening. There, if you like, and it really quiets you, I'll come to-night. I'll promise that I'll manage it somehow, but I must go now."

"Oh, miss, please take the picture with you! Put it in your pocket, miss. Oh, *do* take it away, Miss Ermengarde; I had such awful, awful dreams about it all night long, and I fancied as the little lady herself come and told me I was to put the picture back. I saw her come in at the door heaps of times, and she always told me to put the picture back, and to be quick about it. *Please* put the picture into your pocket, Miss Ermengarde."

Ermengarde laughed harshly.

"You must be mad, Susan," she said. "How could I put a miniature in a glass frame into the pocket of this thin dress? Why, everyone would see it, and then where should I be? It's all your own fault, Susy: you would not give up the picture yesterday when I coaxed you to, and now you must keep it until it is convenient for me to fetch it. If I can, I'll come for it to-night."

"Mother will find it out, miss. I can't move hand nor foot, and mother has only to open my drawer at the top there, and she'll see it. Mother'll know at once that I took it, for the servants at the Chase are talking about it. I do wish you'd get it out of the house somehow, Miss Ermengarde."

"I can't, I tell you. It wouldn't get into my pocket. Oh, dear, dear, there's your mother's step on the stairs, and I must fly. What a horrid troublesome girl you are, Susy. I wish I had never made friends with you!"

Poor Susan began to cry feebly.

"Oh, Miss Ermie, you are cruel," she said. "And mother is sure to open that top drawer, for I keep all my handkerchiefs in it. I pretended the key was lost, but she found it herself this morning and she was just going to open the drawer when you came in, and I thought I was saved. *Please*, Miss Ermie, if

you won't take the picture away, put it somewhere else."

Mrs. Collins's step was now really heard on the creaking stairs. Ermengarde flew to the drawer, unlocked it, seized the little miniature and looked round her wildly. The next moment she had pushed it between the paillasse and mattress of Susy's bed.

"I'll come and fetch it to-night, whatever happens," she said.

CHAPTER XI.

AFTER THE FUN.

HERE was wild fun at Salter's Point. A cove was found with yellow sand as smooth as glass: here the picnic dinner was spread, and here the boys and girls laughed heartily and enjoyed themselves well. There seemed no hitch anywhere, and if Basil kept a little aloof from Ermengarde, and if Ermengarde was a trifle more subdued and had less of a superior air than was her wont, no one noticed these small circumstances. Marjorie laughed until she cried: Eric stood on his head and turned somersaults and performed conjuring tricks and was really the most witty, fascinating little fellow. Even Miss Nelson laughed at Eric, and Mr. Wilton openly regretted that the old established position of the family at Wilton Place prevented his making his son a clown at the pantomime.

But the brightest days come to an end, and when the picnic dinner was eaten, the dishes washed and replaced in their baskets, when each child, aided by patient Marjorie, had secured

a liberal supply of shells, and each little chubby face had gazed with ecstasy into the pools which contained the wonderful gardens of seaweeds and sea-anemones, it was time to pack the wagonette once more, to fill the pony-carriage, and to start for home.

Ermengarde once more seated herself in the pony-carriage. Basil was standing near.

"Come," she said to him. "Miss Nelson can go home in the wagonette, and then you and I can have these comfortable seats facing the horses. Come! what are you standing dreaming there for?"

"I beg your pardon," said Basil, starting. "No. I promised Maggie to go back in the wagonette, and here comes Miss Nelson. Oh, Miss Nelson, you do look fagged out. Here's a jolly seat for you next to Ermengarde in the pony-trap, and these three young 'uns can be packed together at the other side. Now then, babies, pop in. Look out, Lucy! don't tread on Polly's toes—off you go."

The ponies started forward at a round pace; a deep flush mounted to Ermengarde's brow. What was the matter with Basil? He was always good-natured, certainly, but at another time he would have jumped at her offer, for Miss Nelson would really have been just as happy in the wagonette. Ermengarde now

remembered that Basil had been a little queer to her all day, a tiny bit distant, not quite his cordial self. Could he suspect anything? But no, that was absolutely impossible.

Miss Nelson thought her eldest pupil rather sulky during the drive back. She sighed once or twice as she glanced at the girl's irresponsive face. Ermengarde was certainly difficult to manage. Should she continue to take charge of her? Would it not be best to own at once that over this girl she had no influence, and to ask Mr Wilton to remove Ermengarde from her care?

The party reached home, and supper and fireworks, according to Marjorie's programme, were all crowded into the happy day. But at last tired eyes could keep open no longer, the small children were tucked into their nests, and the elder ones were by no means sorry to follow their example.

"Oh, I am tired out," said Marjorie to Ermengarde. "It *is* nice to think of getting into one's bed, and going off into a long, long sleep. And hadn't we a happy day, Ermie?"

"Yes," said Ermengarde, in an abstracted voice. She was standing by the window. She had not attempted to undress.

Hudson generally helped the little girls to prepare for the night, but as she was particu-

lately busy reducing Chaos to order downstairs, Marjorie had said they could get on quite well alone for this one evening. She now came to Ermengarde, to ask her to unfasten a knot in her dress.

"And why don't you take off your own things, Ermie?" she said.

"There's no particular hurry," said Ermengarde.

"But aren't you dreadfully tired?"

"No. I did not get up at four o'clock this morning."

"Oh, what fun we had waking father!" began Marjorie. "If you had only seen Eric: and father's face when first he opened his eyes. I do believe—why, what's the matter, Ermie, have you a headache?"

"No; how you do worry one, Maggie! Go to bed, and try to stop talking; I want to think, and to be let alone. I'll come to bed when I feel inclined."

A torrent of words came to the tip of Marjorie's tongue, but she restrained them. It was Ermie's custom sometimes to be very snappy and uncommunicative. She concluded the wisest policy was to let her sister alone, and to go to sleep herself as fast as possible.

Accordingly she knelt for a few moments by her bedside in her little white nightdress, and

then tumbled into it, and with a happy sigh went off into the land of dreams.

A moment or two later Ermengarde softly opened the door of the sleeping-room and went out. It was ten o'clock, and the household, tired from the day's pleasuring, were all preparing to go to bed. Ermengarde ran along the corridor, flew downstairs the back way, and found herself in the schoolroom part of the house. She took her waterproof cloak and an old garden-hat from a peg on the wall, and let herself out by a sidedoor. If she ran very fast she would probably be back before George, the old butler, had drawn the bolts and put the chain on for the night. If not, she knew that it would not be difficult to open one of the schoolroom windows, which were low, and as often as not unhasped. Ermengarde had herself noticed that the bolt of one was not fastened that evening. If the worst came, she could return to her little bed that way, but she fully expected to be in time to come back by the door.

The moment she got out, she slipped on her waterproof and hat, and then, with the speed and lightness of a little fawn, flew down the narrow pathway which led first to the park, and then across it to the keeper's cottage.

The moonlight lay in silver bars over the

grass, and when Ermengarde got under the trees their great shadows looked black and portentous. At another time she might have felt some sensations of fear at finding herself at so late an hour alone in the woods, but she was too intent now on the object of her mission to have any room for nervousness. She was out of breath when she reached the cottage, but to her relief saw that its inmates were not yet in bed, for light shone from the kitchen and also from Susy's bedroom.

Ermengarde's knock at the kitchen door was answered by Mrs. Collins herself.

"Oh, Miss Wilton, I am pleased to see you," she said. "Susy was fretting ever so for fear you wouldn't be able to keep your word. Come in, miss, please; and has Master Basil come with you? or maybe it's Hudson? I hope whoever it is will be pleased to walk in and wait in the kitchen."

"No, I've come alone," said Ermengarde shortly. "You know I am not allowed to be with Susy, so how could I possibly ask anyone to come with me?"

"Oh, my dear young lady, as if my poor child could harm any one! You are good and brave, Miss Ermengarde; as brave as you're beautiful, and I'm sure we'll none of us ever forget it to you. No, that we won't."

Ermengarde was never proof against flattery. A satisfied smile stole now over her face.

"I was not at all afraid," she said. "I had given my word that I would come, and of course a lady's word must always be kept. How *is* Susy, Mrs. Collins?"

"Oh, my dear, but poorly. Very fractious and feverish, and her pain is considerable. But she'll be better after she has seen you, my sweet young lady, for no one knows better than Susy how to appreciate condescension."

"Well, I can't wait more than a minute, Mrs. Collins. I'll just run up and say good-night to Susy, and then I must be off."

"Shall I light you up, miss?"

"No, thank you. I can see my way perfectly."

Ermengarde ran up the little wooden ladder like stairs, and bounded somewhat noisily into Susy's bedroom.

"Here I am, Susy; now give me the miniature at once. I'll hide it under my waterproof cloak."

"I can't reach to it, miss," said Susy. "It's where you put it this morning, atween the mattress and the paillasse, and I had the greatest work keeping mother's hands off it, for she was bent on making the bed all over again."

"Well, I'll take it now. Yes, here it is."

Ermengarde pulled the little case from under the bed.

"O Susy!" she said, uttering an exclamation of dismay, "what shall we do? The ivory on which the picture is painted is cracked right across! Oh, what a queer expression it gives to the little girl's face, and what will Miss Nelson say?"

"Now, miss, you're not going to betray me about it, and me so bad and ill?"

"No, you little coward, you shan't get into any scrape. How did this happen? The picture was right enough this morning."

"I expect it was the way you pushed it under the bed, miss. It got knocked most likely, and father was sitting just over it for an hour and more this afternoon, and he's a goodish weight."

"Well, I shall take the miniature away now, so good-night, Susy. I'm very sorry I ever made such a little thief as you are my friend. A nice scrape you've got me into!"

Emmeline thrust the miniature under her waterproof, and rushed downstairs.

"Good-night, Mrs. Collins," she said.

"Stay a minute, miss. Collins is just coming in, and he'll see you home."

"No, I can't possibly wait. I think Susy is better—good-night."

"But aren't you afeard to go right across the park by yourself at this hour, miss?"

"No—no—no; good-night, good-night!"

Ermengarde's voice already sounded far away. Her feet seemed to have wings, she ran so fast. As she ran she heard the stable-clock strike eleven.

"Oh, I do trust they have not locked up the house!" she exclaimed. "Suppose they have, and suppose George has put the bolt on the schoolroom window? He's as careless as possible about fastening the bolts of the windows as a rule, but it wouldn't be like him to do it to-night of all nights. Oh, what shall I do, if that has happened?"

Ermengarde's heart beat so fast at the bare idea that she could scarcely run. She stumbled too, over a piece of twine which lay across her path, and falling somewhat heavily scraped her forehead. She had no time to think of the pain then. Rising as quickly as possible, she panted along the familiar road. How weary it was! How tedious! Would it never, never end?

At last she came under the shadows caused by the rambling old house. She flew down a side-walk which led through a shrubbery; now she was passing under the window of Miss Nelson's private room, now she saw the three long low windows of the dear cozy old schoolroom. The blinds were drawn down, and there was

light within—a faint light, it is true, but still light. Ermengarde felt a sense both of relief and fear.

The side-entrance door was reached at last. She turned the handle. Her fingers were cold and trembling. The handle turned, but the door did not move. Had she turned the handle of the door quite round—were her fingers too weak for the task? She tried again in vain. Then she uttered a sound something between a sob and a cry—she was really locked out!

"What *shall* I do?" murmured the unhappy child.

She looked around her wildly. She did not dare try the schoolroom window while that light remained within. She leant up against the locked door, trembling, incapable of action; a very little would have made her lose her self-control.

At this moment her sharp ear heard a sound; the sound was made by a movement in the schoolroom. Ermengarde started away a step or two from the hall-door; she saw some one go up to one of the windows and, without drawing up the blind, put a hand underneath to feel if the fastening was to. It was not, but was immediately bolted. The steps then went across the room.

At this moment Ermengarde felt desperate,

Old George was faithful to-night, of all nights. Dreadful, terrible old George!

Suddenly in her despair she seized upon the last chance of succor. She would call to George to let her in, and afterward trust to her wits to bribe the old servant to silence.

No sooner did this idea come to her than she acted on it, and in a frenzy of terror began to call George's name through the keyhole.

A step came into the passage, there was a surprised pause, then a rush to the door, which was quickly opened. Basil, not George, stood before Ermengarde.

"Ernie!" he exclaimed. His face got crimson, then it turned white. His first exclamation had been full of astonished affection and concern, but in a flash his manner altered; he caught Ermengarde roughly by the shoulder, and dragged her into the house.

"Come into the schoolroom," he said.

"O Basil, don't—don't look at me like that."

"I'm not looking at you in any way. I must lock this door, I suppose. Did you know it was past eleven o'clock?"

"Yes, yes, I heard the stable-clock strike. Oh, I was so terrified. Basil, why are you looking like that?"

"I'm not looking any way. Don't be a goose. Here, come into the schoolroom."

"No, I am tired. I want to go to bed. I'll—I'll explain everything to you to-morrow."

"Look here, Ermengarde." Basil held a small lamp in his hand, and its light fell on Ermengarde's face. "You have got to come into the schoolroom and make no words about it, or I'll—I'll take you, just as you are, straight away to father, to his study."

"You are very cruel," sobbed Ermengarde. But she went into the schoolroom without another word.

Basil followed her, and shut the door behind him.

"Now look here," he said. "I don't want to bother you, nor any nonsense of that sort, but you have got to tell me the truth without making any bones about it. What's up with you, Ermengarde—what's wrong?"

He had set the lamp on the mantelpiece, and stood himself facing its full light. His clear-cut face looked stern and dark; there was no tenderness in his manner.

Ermengarde drew up her slight little figure proudly. "You are not my father," she said. "I won't answer you when you speak to me in that tone."

"All right! you shall come to the one who has a right to order you. Come along."

"No, Basil, no: how *can* you be so unkind?"

She wrenched her hand from his clasp. Her words came out in a sob, tears rushed to her eyes.

"O Basil, I have always loved you."

"Stuff, this is no minute for sentiment. I love honorable and truthful girls: I loved a girl who was that. Now tell me the truth, and be quick about it, for if you don't, I'll take you to father: he's not in bed, but he will be soon, so you had better make up your mind at once."

"What am I to say to you, Basil?"

"That's for you to decide. *You* know what's up: I don't. You know why you turned so queer this morning when Collins stopped the pony-trap and why you are out all by yourself close on midnight."

"I went to see Susy Collins. I don't know why you should speak to me in that tone.

"*Do* stop bothering about my tone, Ermie. Can't you see that you have done frightfully wrong? I—I——" He gulped down something in his throat. "There: I can't speak of it, I think I'm stunned. I simply can't make out what has come to you, having secrets with a girl my father has forbidden you to know!"

"I haven't secrets with her."

"You have. For goodness' sake, don't add lying to all the rest of it. Would you have

turned so white this morning if you hadn't a secret, and would you have crept out of the house in this disgraceful way if you hadn't a secret? Come, Ermie, I'm older than you—and—and—our mother isn't here. Tell me all about it, Ermie."

This was Ermengarde's chance. For the moment the severe young judge before her was softened; a memory of his mother had done it; that, and the knowledge that Ermengarde was younger and frailer than himself. Had she told him the whole truth then, she might have saved herself with Basil. Like many another, however, she let the golden moment pass.

For half a minute she was absolutely silent. Then she said in her most stubborn voice: "I don't tell lies—I have no secret with Susy. I went to her to-night because I was sorry for her, and because I—I—I was afraid to stay long enough this morning. Everyone is so horridly hard on me because I befriend a poor little girl like Susy, and now when she is ill and all. That's why I went to her secretly, because—because people make me afraid."

"When you say people, you mean our father?"

"Well, yes; I think it is horrid of father to make such a fuss about my knowing Susy. Mother wouldn't have done it."

"Hush, don't bring mother into this conversation, Ermengarde." Basil knit his brows in pain.

"I suppose I may go to bed now," said Ermengarde, after a long pause. "I have nothing more to say. I went to see Susy because I was sorry for her, and I—I was afraid—that's all. If I were to stay here till morning I could not say anything more."

Whatever effect these words of Ermengarde might have had upon Basil—whether he would have believed her, and only attributed to her the sin of disobedience in seeking another interview with Susy—can never be known; for, as the little girl, interpreting his silence for consent, was about to leave the room, she stumbled against a footstool, and the precious miniature fell from its place of concealment to the floor.

Ermengarde uttered a cry, but before she could even stoop to pick up the picture, Basil had seized it: he gave it one look, his lips twitched curiously, then he slipped it into the inner pocket of his Eton jacket.

"Basil, Basil, oh give it to me! Basil, Basil, *please* give me that picture back!"

"No—it isn't yours. I know your secret. You can go to bed now. I don't want to say anything more to you to-night."

"Basil!"

In her terror and anguish Ermengarde went on her knees.

"O Basil, be merciful! I'll tell you everything. I will, really and truly."

"Get up, Ermengarde. For goodness' sake, don't make an exhibition of yourself. I don't want to hear anything more you have got to say. Go to bed, and leave me in peace."

"Give me back the miniature."

"Certainly not. It is not yours."

"What will you do with it?"

"Give it back to Miss Nelson, of course."

"Then I am lost." Ermengarde gave a bitter cry, and rushed to the door. Before she could reach it, Basil stepped before her.

"Don't go into hysterics," he said. "Go up to your room and keep quiet. You have done mischief enough, and caused suffering enough. Don't add to it all by making a fuss and waking the house. I *have* got some feeling, and I can *not* speak to you to-night. This has somehow taken the—the courage out of me. I'll think it over to-night, and I'll see you again in the morning."

"O Basil! And you won't tell anyone till you have seen me again?"

Basil put his hand up to his forehead. He considered for a moment. "I think I may promise that," he said then slowly.

"And where am I to meet you, Basil?"

"Meet me in the shrubbery after morning school. Now go to bed."

He took up the lamp and left the schoolroom. Ermengarde watched him as he slowly ascended the stairs and turned down the corridor which led to the boys' bedrooms. He took the light away with him in more senses than one, but Ermengarde little reeked of darkness just then. She threw herself on the floor in the old schoolroom, and gave vent to a passion of weeping, shedding tears which not even her mother's death had wrung from her.

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER THE BIRTHDAY.

THE usual effects of a holiday were visible the next morning. The children were all a little tired and out of sorts. It was difficult for the schoolroom party to get into harness again, and even Eric and the nursery children were somewhat captious and discontented.

"Father's birthday is the farthest off of all now," said little Molly the five-year-old darling. "There's no birthday after Father's, and it's the farthest off of all. I'm dreadful sorry."

"Oh, shut up," said Eric. "Who wants to hear that dismal dirge."

"Molly says that about the birthdays always the next morning," volunteered Bird, who was a year older and who wanted to curry favor with Eric by agreeing with him. "Molly is a silly, and she," he added, fixing his big blue eyes admiringly on his brother.

"You're a goose," snapped Eric. "Who cried yesterday when the ant stung him, and who would eat too much plumcake?"

Dick looked inclined to cry again, and Molly laughed maliciously. Altogether the atmosphere was charged with electricity, and the entrance of Ermengarde, her face considerably disfigured with the scar she had received when she fell the night before, was hailed with naughty delight by the children.

A torrent of questions assailed her. Had she fought with Marjorie in the night, and had Marjorie come off victorious? Oh, brave Marjorie, to dare to assail the acknowledged beauty of the family! What *had* happened to Ernie? Surely she had not inflicted the wound on herself?

Basil was seated in his usual place near the head of the table. He had scarcely heard the little scrimmage of words which was going on on all sides. Basil was in a brown study, and, as Eric expressed it, as cross as a bear with a sore head.

When Ermengarde entered the room, he glanced at her for a second; but contrary to his wont, he took no notice when the children began to laugh and gibe.

Ermengarde's place beside Basil was empty. She seated herself, and as the children continued to make remarks and to laugh, turned her head impatiently away. Their quips affected her in reality only as pin-pricks, but she was

very much afraid that Miss Nelson would notice the disfiguring cut on her brow.

"Do be quiet, children," said Marjorie. "Eric, can't you see that Ernie has a headache? Can't you keep them from making so much noise, Eric?"

"Quiet then, young 'une," said Eric. "Can't you see that the Prime Minister of her Royal Highness has uttered a mandate?"

The children laughed merrily, and at that moment Miss Nelson, who had been absorbed over the contents of a particularly interesting letter, raised her head with a start.

"Gently, little ones! What is all this noise about?" she said. "Molly and Dick, you must have breakfast with nurse, if you can't behave better in the schoolroom. Good-morning, Ermengarde, my dear. I am sorry I shall be obliged to give you a bad mark for being late at breakfast. Why, my dear child," changing her note to one of concern, "what has happened to you? You have got quite an ugly scar across your forehead. How did you get it?"

"I fell," said Ermengarde, in a low voice.

"You fell—where?"

Ermengarde felt that Basil had ceased to use his knife and fork, while he listened for her reply. She waived a cup of scalding tea, and choked over its contents.

"Where did you fall, my dear?" asked the governess kindly.

"Please, ma'am, Ermengarde and Maggie had a standup fight in the middle of the night," interrupted Eric. "Oh, my stars!" he added, *sotto voce*, "if fight and night ain't a rhyme made unbeknown. Now I can wish."

"Shut up!" growled Basil.

"Eric, be quiet," said the governess.

She turned again to Ermengarde. Her manner was very gentle.

"Where did you fall, dear?" she said. "You have given yourself a very nasty cut, and should have come to me for some dressing for it. But where did it happen, my love?"

"In the park," said Ermengarde, in a low voice. "I fell over a bramble and cut myself."

"I never saw you fall, Ernie," said Marjorie. "Was it when we all had that race, just when the fireworks were over? How brave of you not to make a fuss! it must have been then."

"You don't look well, dear," continued the governess. "Your eyes have red rings round them, and you are peler than such a healthy little girl ought to be. Have you a headache?"

"Yes," confessed Ermengarde. She could at least be truthful here, for her head ached considerably.

"You shall have some of my eau de Cologne to use if you like, darling," whispered Marjorie.

"Now, children," said Miss Nelson, rising from the breakfast-table, and making one of those prim little speeches which Ermengarde detested, "having had our day of pleasure, we will return with greater zest to our usual employments. Little ones, go quietly up to nurse. No noise, please. Leave the breakfast-room hand in hand. Boys, I must request of you not to disturb your sisters with any hammering or noisy carpentering this morning."

"Please, are the ferrets far enough away for me to have a quiet little game with them?" asked Eric meekly. He pulled his forelock as he spoke, and put on the air of a charity-school-boy.

Miss Nelson favored him with the shadow of a smile, and continued;

"Ermengarde, Marjorie, and Lucy, we will meet in the schoolroom for our usual morning work in half an hour. Ah, what is the matter, George?"

The old butler had entered unobserved.

"If you please, ma'am," he said in his most respectful tones, "my master's compliments, and he would be obliged if you and Miss Wilton would come to him for a few minutes to the study before you begins the morning work."

"Certainly, George. Tell Mr. Wilton we will be with him in a minute or two."

The governess flushed up a little at this unexpected summons, but the color which came into her faded cheeks was nothing at all to the brilliant red which suffused Ermengarde's face. She darted an angry inquiring look at Basil, who for the first time met her glance with a proud cool gaze. He turned on his heel, and leisurely left the room, the other children following his example.

"Come, Ermie, we may as well see what your father wants with us," said Miss Nelson cheerfully. "My boy, I am sorry you have a headache, and that you fell that time without letting anyone know."

"Please, I would much rather not go to father to the study," said Ermengarde, hesitating a pace or two. She looked really frightened.

"You think your father will be vexed about that cut on your brow, dear? But I can explain that. You have really been brave, not to make a fuss, nor to spoil the pleasure of the other children. Come, my dear, we must not keep your father waiting."

Miss Nelson took Ermengarde's hand; it lay cold and irresponsive in her clasp. They left the breakfast-room together, and a moment later were in Mr. Wilton's presence.

The father who was the heart and soul of the birthday, who was everybody's playmate, and hail-fellow-well-met even with the youngest of his children, was a totally different person from Mr. Wilton, owner of Wilton Chase, and the master, not only of his extensive property, but of poor timid Miss Nelson and of wondering Ermengarde. Mr. Wilton could be the jolliest of companions if he pleased, but he also could be stern, with a severity which Basil inherited. At such times his face was scarcely prepossessing. He came of a proud race, and pride, mixed with an almost overbearing haughtiness of manner, made him a person to be dreaded at such moments.

As soon as Miss Nelson and Ermengarde entered the study, they saw that Mr. Wilton had put on the manner which made him to be feared. Miss Nelson, who had thawed under the genial sunshine of the day before, now froze, and her speech instantly became broken, nervous, and ill at ease. Ermengarde frowned, turned her head away, and got that blank look over her face which always made her such a difficult child to deal with.

"Good morning, Miss Nelson," said Mr. Wilton, "I have sent for you and Ermengarde together, in order that I may ask for an explanation. I did not moot the question yesterday,

although the circumstance which aroused my displeasure occurred the day before. Pray take this chair, Miss Nelson."

Mr. Wilton did not offer Ermengarde any seat. Beyond a brief glance, he did not look at her. The little girl stood silent by her governess's side. Whatever was coming she owned now to a sense of relief. Her father was coming to something which had occurred the day before yesterday. He—it had therefore not betrayed her—the worst was not known. She roused herself from a brief misery to hear her father speaking.

"Some time ago, Miss Nelson, I made a request to you, and I gave Ermengarde a very strict command. I find that my command has been defied by Ermengarde, and I wish to know if there has been any negligence on your part."

"My dear sir, to what do you allude?" asked Miss Nelson.

"To something which you cannot have forgotten, for I spoke seriously to you on the subject. I said that Ermengarde was to hold no intercourse with a little girl called Susan Collins. I had my reasons for this, quite independent of the fact that the child belongs to a lower class of life. I know that she is the daughter of a vain and silly mother, and, soon

if she were her equal by birth, would be the worst possible companion for Ermengarde. Did I not make my wishes on this point very plain to you, Miss Nelson?"

Miss Nelson rose from her seat.

"Certainly, my dear sir; most certainly," she said; "and I—I agree with you. I more than agree with you. Susan is not a companion for Ermengarde. I have been careful about your wishes, Mr. Wilton: I respect them, and my own fully coincide with them. I only—I only gave Ermengarde permission to go to Susan for five minutes yesterday because the child was feverish and badly hurt after her accident."

"Her accident! Yes, poor little girl, I have heard of that; but I was not alluding to yesterday, nor to anything that occurred then. Please sit down again, Miss Nelson; I see you are not to blame. Ermengarde, come here. Who were you walking with the day before yesterday, between eleven and twelve o'clock, in the Nightingale Grove?"

Ermengarde's face turned first white and then crimson. Her eyes sought the ground. She bit her lips and clasped her hands nervously.

"Answer me at once," said Mr. Wilton, in his sternest voice.

The little girl made an effort to speak. Suddenly she did a thing which astonished both her father and the governess. She flew to Miss Nelson's side, and clasped her arms round her neck.

"Do tell him not to be angry with me! I'm so awfully miserable," she sobbed.

"Tell your kind father the truth, my dear. Speak up; be brave," whispered the governess back, touched in spite of herself by any token of softness from Ermie.

Ermengarde gulped down her sobs. She raised her head, and spoke with a violent effort.

"I was with Susan Collins in the Nightingale Grove," she said.

"Contrary to my express command?" queried Mr. Wilton.

"Yes, father."

"Is this the only time you have held forbidden intercourse with this little girl, Ermengarde?"

"No, father. I saw her once or twice before."

"Since I told you not?"

"Yes."

"Did Miss Nelson ever know of this?"

"No, she never knew."

"Don't you think you are very naughty and disobedient; that you have acted disgracefully?"

The sulky look came over Ermengarde's face.

"There is no harm in Susy," she said.

Mr. Wilton stamped his foot.

"That is not the point," he said. "Is there no harm in you? can you disobey me with impunity, and cast your father's sternest commands to nought? Ermengarde, I am stung by this. You have hurt me deeply."

Again Ermengarde saw Basil in her father's face. She was frightened and tired, and burst out sobbing afresh.

"I won't go with Susy any more," she said. "And I—I'm sorry—I'm really sorry."

Miss Nelson put her hand affectionately on her pupil's shoulder.

"I need not say, sir," she said, turning to Mr. Wilton, "how shocked I am at all this, and at—at Ermengarde's willful disobedience; but," here she paused, and pressed her hand a little firmer upon the weeping girl's shoulder, "if it is any use, and because I was their mother's friend, I, too, would like to add my promise to Ermengarde's, and assure you that this shall never occur again."

Mr. Wilton glanced round impatiently at the clock.

"Thank you, Miss Nelson," he said. "I believe you, of course; and I am sure that you

will now have your eyes opened, and will probably take steps to insure my desires being carried into effect. As to Ermengarde, I will adhere to her promises when she has proved them to be worth anything. She is the first Wilton I ever heard of who stooped to deceit. In the meantime I feel it is my duty to punish you, Ermengarde. This morning I had a letter from the Russells—Lily Russell's father and mother. They have asked me to come to them for a week, and to bring two of you with me. I intended to take you and Basil. Now I shall take Marjorie and Basil. Perhaps, when you are having a dull time at home, you will reflect that it is not always worth while to disobey your father. You can go back to your lessons now."

CHAPTER XIII.

BASIL'S OPINION.

T half-past eleven that day, Ermengarde found Basil waiting for her in the shrubbery. He was walking up and down, whistling to himself, and now and then turning round to say a pleasant word to a small white kitten who sat on his shoulder and purred. Basil was devoted to animals, and this kitten was a special favorite.

As Ermengarde advanced slowly through the trees to meet her brother, she saw this little scene, and a very bitter feeling came over her.

"He can be kind to everyone but me," she thought. "Even a stupid tiresome little cat can win kind glances from him. But I'm not going to let him see that I care. If he expects perfection in me, the sooner he is undeceived the better. And as for me, I suppose I can do without his affection, if he won't give it."

Busy with these thoughts, Ermie's face wore its most stubborn expression as she approached her brother. The moment Basil saw her, he

whisked the kitten off his shoulder, and came up to her side.

"I have thought it all out, Ermengarde," he said, "and I have made up my mind what to do."

Ermengarde did not speak. She raised her eyes to Basil's face. There was entreaty in them, but he would not fully meet her glance.

"There is no use in my going over the thing with you," continued Basil. "If you could do it, no words of mine could make you see your conduct in its true light. Besides, I am not the one to preach to you. I am only a year older, and, as you reminded me last night, I have no sort of authority over you."

"Forget what I said last night!" pleaded Ermengarde.

"No, that is just the point. I can't forget — I shall never forget. The old relations between us are over, and as far as I am concerned it is impossible to restore them."

"Oh, Basil, you kill me when you speak so unkindly."

Ermengarde covered her face; her slight form was shaken by sobs.

"I am sorry," he said; "I cannot imagine why you value my regard, for we have quite different codes of honor; we look at things from totally different standpoints. I don't want to hold

myself up, but I couldn't act as you have done, Ermengarde."

"Oh, Basil, if you only would be merciful."

Basil felt a growing sense of irritation.

"Will you stop crying, and listen to me?" he said.

Ermengarde controlled, with a great effort, to raise her tearstained face.

"You imagine that I have no feeling for you," continued Basil. "You are mistaken: I have. I used to put you on a pedestal. Of course you have come down from that, but still I don't forget that you are my sister, and as far as possible I intend to shield you. The discovery that I made last night shall not pass my lips. Miss Nelson must certainly get back the brooch—a miniature of her little sister, but I am not going to tell her how it came into my possession. That's all—I'll shield you. You can go now."

Ermengarde would have pleaded still further, but Basil at that moment heard some one calling him, and ran off, uttering boyish shouts as he did so.

"He doesn't care a bit," muttered Ernie. She turned and walked back to the house.

For a time she felt stunned and sore; life scarcely seemed worth living out of the sunshine of Basil's favor. But after a time less worthy

thoughts took possession of her, and she felt a sense of relief that the adventure of last night would never be known.

Marjorie came dancing down from the house to meet her sister.

"What *do* you think, Ermie? I'm to go away to-morrow for a whole delicious week with father and Basil! We are going to the Russells' —Basil has just told me. Isn't it perfectly, perfectly splendid!"

"I wish you wouldn't bother, Maggie. You are so rough," answered Ermengarde. "I came out here just to have quiet, and to get rid of my headache, and of course you come shouting to me."

"Oh, I'm ever so sorry. I forgot about your headache," answered Marjorie. "It's dreadful of me, I know."

She walked on quietly by Ermengarde's side, the joy on her face a little damped. But presently, being a most irrepressible child, it bubbled over again.

"I wouldn't be so awfully, awfully glad, only you *have* been at the Russells', Ermie. You spent a fortnight with them after Christmas, and Lily always promised that she'd have me asked next. I can't help being delighted about it," continued Marjorie, "for I do so love Lily."

"You little minx! And I suppose you

imagine that a big girl like Lilias Russell cares for you! Why, she's fifteen, and ever so tall."

"But she said she was very fond of me," answered Marjorie.

"Oh, she *said* it! And you believed it, of course! Have you no observation of character? Can't you see, unless you're as blind as a bat, that Lilias Russell is one of those polite sort of people who always must say pleasant things just for the sake of making themselves agreeable. Well, my dear, go and worship her, you have my absence now for a week; only, for goodness' sake don't worry me any more about it."

Marjorie ran off in her soulful little way. Emmeline watched her as her sturdy figure disappeared from view.

"Heedless child!" she said to herself, "and so plain. I can't make out why people make such a fuss about her. She's always held up to me as a sort of model. How I detest models, particularly the Maggie kind! Now I know exactly what will happen. She'll go to Friendower with father and Basil, and won't she gush just! I know how she'll pet Lilias Russell, and how she'll paw her. And Lilias is just that weak sort of girl, with all her grace and prettiness, to be taken in by that sort of

thing. Lilias fancies that she has taken quite a liking for Maggie—as if she could make a friend of her! Why, Maggie's a baby, and a very conceited, troublesome one too"

It was now time for Ermengarde to go in. She pleaded a headache, and so escaped doing any more lessons that day, and in the afternoon she managed to make the hours pass agreeably over the "Heir of Redclyffe," which she was reading for the first time, and so did not miss Basil's attention and companionship as much as she would otherwise have done.

All the rest of the children and Miss Nelson were busy and interested in preparing Marjorie for her visit to Glendower. Basil had gone out fishing with his father; Eric had coaxed to be allowed to go with the under-gamekeeper to see the young pheasants. The house was very still, and Ermie had the pleasant old schoolroom to herself. She read eagerly: in spite of herself—perhaps unknown to herself—she was anxious to drown reflection.

It was late in the evening of that same day that Miss Nelson answered a knock which came to her sitting-room door, and was surprised to see Basil pop in his dark head.

"Oh, you're alone that's right," he said. "May I come in for a minute?"

His manner was a little nervous and hurried.

in perfect contrast to his usual open, frank sort of way.

"I've brought you this back," he said, going up to Miss Nelson. "I'm awfully sorry about it, and the worst of it is I can't give any explanation. It's disgracefully broken and injured, but I thought you would rather have it back as it is, than never to see it again."

Miss Nelson turned very white while Basil was speaking. An eager, longing, hopeful look grew and grew in her eyes. She stretched out her hands; they trembled.

"My miniature!" she exclaimed. "My picture once again. Oh, Basil, thank God! Oh, I have missed it!"

"Here it is," said Basil. He had wrapped the poor little injured picture up in some white tissue-paper, and tied the parcel together with a bit of ribbon. He hoped Miss Nelson would say something before she opened it.

"Here it is—it isn't a bit the same," he said.

She scarcely heard him. She began feverishly to pull the ribbon away.

"I wouldn't look at it just for a minute," began Basil. He had scarcely spoken, before there came a knock at the door. A firm voice said, "May I come in?" and Miss Wilton, who had returned from London about an hour before, entered the room. She came in just in time to

see Miss Nelson remove the tissue-paper from the broken face of the miniature. The poor governess uttered a piercing cry, sank down on her knees by the center table, and covered her thin face with her hands.

"What is it, Basil? What is the matter?" asked Miss Wilton in astonishment. "I come in to find high heroics going on. What is the matter?"

Basil did not say a word. Miss Nelson suddenly raised her pale face. She rose to her feet. "Not high heroics," she said, "but deep grief; I had a memento of the past—a young and happy past. I treasured it. It was stolen from me about ten days ago. I don't know by whom. I don't know why it was stolen. Now it has been returned—like this."

Miss Wilton took the broken ivory in her hand.

"Dear, dear," she said. "How disgraceful, this miniature has been cracked and distorted. A child's face, I see, painted in a weak, washed-out style, and glass and ivory are both broken, and frame bent. This miniature must have been subjected to very rough usage. The miniature is yours, Miss Nelson?"

"Yes. It is a likeness of my—my sister. Give it back to me, please, Miss Wilton."

"And you say it was stolen from you?"

"Yes. It always hung over that mantelpiece. It was taken away the day after the boys came home from school."

Miss Wilton stood quite still for a moment: she was a very downright, practical sort of person. "Extraordinary as my question must seem, Basil," she said, turning suddenly to her nephew, "I am forced to ask it, as you appear to be mixed up in the affair. Did you take the miniature?"

"I? Certainly not," said Basil, coloring high.

"But you know something about it?"

"Yes; I know something about it."

"Who took it away?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you, Aunt Elizabeth."

Miss Nelson gazed anxiously into Basil's face. She had put the broken bits of ivory on the table. Now she tenderly laid the soft tissue-paper over them.

"You have brought me back the miniature, Basil," she said.

"I have," said Basil bluntly, "and that's about all. I don't know how it was broken, and what else I know I am not going to tell. I'm awfully sorry about the whole thing, but I thought you would rather have the miniature back as it is, than not get it at all, Miss Nelson."

"That is true," said Miss Nelson.

Basil was turning to leave the room, but Miss Wilton suddenly stepped before him to the door, and shut it.

"You shan't leave, sir, until you tell everything!" she said. "*I* know what mischievous creatures boys are. You took that miniature away out of wanton mischief; you fiddled with it, and broke it, and now you are afraid to confess. But I'll have no funking the truth. Tell what you have done, this minute, you bad boy!"

"I found the miniature, and I've returned it to Miss Nelson," replied Basil, in a quiet, still voice, which kept under all the anger which made his dark eyes glow.

"Yes, and you stole it in the first instance, and then broke it. Out with the truth; no hesitation with me," retorted Miss Wilton.

Basil laughed harshly.

"You're mistaken, Aunt Elizabeth; I neither stole the miniature nor broke it."

"I am sure Basil is speaking the truth," said Miss Nelson.

"And I am sure of the reverse," retorted Miss Wilton. "There is guilt in his face, in his manner. Naughty, defiant boy, you shall tell me what you know!"

"I am not naughty or defiant, Aunt Eliza

beth, and I don't wish to be rude to you or anyone. I have told all I can about the miniature. May I go now please, Miss Nelson?"

"Highty-tighty!" exclaimed Miss Wilton: "this is insubordination with a vengeance. I shall call my brother here. Basil, I insist upon your remaining where you are until your father arrives."

Miss Wilton immediately left the room. Basil went and stood by the window. The blinds were up, and there was moonlight outside. He could see the path across which Ermengarde had hurried the night before.

Miss Nelson came suddenly up, and touched the boy's arm.

"Basil," she said, "I wish to tell you that I fully believe in you."

"Oh, thank you very much," he answered, glancing at her for an instant, and then gazing once more out of the window.

"But," continued the governess, "I wish you would trust me with the whole truth."

He shook his head. At this moment Mr. Wilton and his sister came in together.

"Now are the circumstances, Roderick," began Miss Wilton at once. "Pray, Miss Nelson, allow me to speak. Here is the miniature, broken in two, disgracefully injured

Here, look at it—a deceased relative, I believe, of Miss Nelson's—stolen out of her room ten days ago. Basil returns it this evening broken, says he does not know how it was broken, and declines to tell how it got into his possession."

Mr. Wilton took the pieces of ivory into his hand, looked at the poor little distorted face, put the pieces back on the table, and turned to his son.

"Is your Aunt Elizabeth's version of this affair correct, Basil?" he inquired.

"Yes, father," replied Basil. "It is perfectly correct. I found the broken miniature, and I have just returned it."

"How did you find it?"

"I can't say, sir."

"You mean you won't say?"

"Very well, father; I won't say."

Mr. Wilton colored. Miss Wilton gave a triumphant "Humph!" and a muttered "I told you so." Miss Nelson nervously clasped and unclasped her thin hands.

"Basil," said his father after a pause, "you are a very good lad, and I have every trust in you. You have a reason for boldly defying your father's wishes. But when I, who am your father, and know a great deal better than you do what is right and wrong in this matter, desire you

once again to tell me all you know, you will, of course, instantly obey me."

"I am deeply and truly sorry, father, but I can't obey you."

"Tch! no more of this! go to my study this moment, and wait there till I come to you."

CHAPTER XIV.

I SERVE.

"MAGGIE," said her governess, early the next morning, "Maggie, dear, wake up at once."

Marjorie opened her sleepy gray eyes with a start, sprang up in bed, and began to rub them violently.

"Oh, Miss Nelson, is that you? What is the matter?"

"I want you to get up, and not to wake Ermengarde. Dress as quickly as possible, and then come to me to my room."

"What can be the matter? Isn't it awfully early? Aren't we going to Glendower today?"

"It is half-past six. Yes, you are going to Glendower by and by. Now dress, and come to me at once."

Miss Nelson left the room. Marjorie tumbled into her clothes in a most untidy manner and joined her governess, looking what she was, very unkempt and tumbled.

"I have been quick, haven't I, Miss Nelson?"

"Yes, dear. Come over, my love, and sit by

me on the sofa. Maggie, my dear, do you know that Basil is in trouble?"

"Basil!" exclaimed Marjorie. "How? Has he hurt himself?"

"He brought me back my miniature last night, Maggie, broken—injured; don't start so, my dear, dear child. He would not tell how it was broken, nor how it got into his possession, and your Aunt Elizabeth happened most unfortunately to come into the room at the moment, and she made a great fuss, and frightened your father: and the end of it is that they both believe Basil to have done something very wrong—in short, that he had something to say to the disappearance of the miniature, and he—he is in disgrace."

"Oh, Miss Nelson, how can father and Aunt Elizabeth be so cruel and unjust?"

"Hush, dear! whatever your father does, you must not speak of him so."

"But don't they both *know* him better? Did he ever in all his life do anything dishonorable or mean?"

"Maggie, *I* fully believe in him."

"Of course you do, dear darling Miss Nelson."

"I wish" continued Miss Nelson, "that we could really find out who took the miniature."

Miss Nelson was looking at Marjorie while she spoke, and now she was surprised to see

a wave of crimson slowly dye the child's cheeks, and cover her brow.

"Why do you look like that, Maggie?" asked the governess. "Do you suspect anything?"

Maggie was silent for a moment. Then she looked up in her frank way.

"I don't really know anything," she said.

"But you have a suspicion."

"I'm not even sure that I have."

"Maggie dear, I would far rather never recover the miniature than get Basil into trouble. My conviction is that he is concealing some knowledge which has come to him for the sake of another. He is making a mistake, of course, but his motives are good. If you can help him, Maggie, if you have any clew by which we can get at the real truth, use it, and quickly, dear child."

Marjorie put on that little important air which sometimes made her brothers and sisters call her goody-goody.

"It seems a pity that I should be going away to-day," she said.

"Oh, you must not be disappointed, Maggie," said her governess. "You don't often get a treat, and you have been so looking forward to spending a few days with Lilias Russell."

"I do love Lily," replied Marjorie. "Only Ermengarde said——" then she stopped.

"What is it, dear?"

"I don't think I'll tell, Miss Nelson, please. I'm afraid, when Ermie said it, she was feeling awfully disappointed. I'll try to forget it. Now, Miss Nelson, what shall I do?"

"Put your wise little brains to work. Try to think how you can clear Basil from suspicion without doing anything shabby or underhand. I know your father is fearfully hurt with him. Much more hurt with him than with Ermengarde, for he has always had such a very high opinion of Basil. Now run away, Maggie, dear, and do your best; but remember I do not wish you to give up your visit. I called you only on purpose that you should have time to think matters over."

Miss Nelson kissed Marjorie, who went solemnly back to her own room.

The sun was now streaming in through the closed blinds, and some of his rays fell across the white bed where Ermengarde lay. The little girl was still fast asleep: all her long hair was tossed over her pillow, and one hand shaded her cheek. Ermengarde was a very pretty girl, and she looked lovely now in the innocent sweet sleep which visits even naughty children.

Marjorie went and stood at the foot of the bed.

"Poor Ermie," she said to herself, "I don't

want to think that she could be mean, and yet and yet—she was in Miss Nelson's room the day the miniature was stolen, and she did seem in a desperate state of trouble that time when she asked me to make an excuse for her to go back to the house. And then what funny words Susy did use that day in the cottage, although she explained them all away afterward. Dear, dear, dear, it's horrid to think that Ernie could do anything wrong. And she looks so *sweet* in her sleep. I wish Miss Nelson hadn't woke me, and told me to be a sort of spy. But oh, poor Basil! I'd do anything in all the world. I'd even be *mean*, to help Basil."

Marjorie sat down on her own little bed, which was opposite to Emmeranthe's. The motto which her mother had given her long ago, the old sacred and time-honored motto, "I serve," floated back to her mind.

"It will be horrid if I have to give up going to Glendower," she whispered under her breath. "I *am* unlucky about treats and I do love Lily. Still, I remember what mother said, 'When you are a servant to others, you are God's servant, Marjorie.' Mother died a week afterward. Oh dear, oh dear, I can't forget her words; but I should dearly like to go to Glendower all the same."

As Marjorie sat on her little bed, she was

kicking her feet backward and forward, and not being a particularly gentle little mortal, she knocked over a box, which effectually wakened Ermengarde.

"What are you doing there?" asked the elder sister. "What in the world are you trying to do, Maggie? It surely is not seven o'clock yet!"

"Yes, it is: it's a quarter-past seven," replied Marjorie.

"Oh, I suppose you are so excited about your stupid old Glendower."

"I'm thinking about it, but I'm not excited," answered Marjorie a little sadly.

"Well, for goodness' sake don't put on that resigned, pious, martyr sort of air. You are going to have your treat, and take it cheerfully. You know you are dying to go, and your heart is going pit-a-pat like anything."

"I wish you wouldn't be so cross with me, Ermie."

"Oh, of course. I'm always cross; no one ever has a good word for me. Now, Maggie, don't begin to argue the point. I wish to goodness you would stay in bed until it is your proper time to rise, and not wake me up before it is necessary. I might have had a quarter of an hour's more sleep if it had not been for you."

"I could not help myself this morning,"

answered Marjorie. "Miss Nelson came and woke me soon after six o'clock."

"Miss Nelson?" Ermengarde was suddenly aroused to interest. "Whatever for?"

"Oh, Ermie, you must hear about it—poor Basil."

Ermengarde half sat up in bed.

"I wish you'd speak right out, Maggie. Has Basil hurt himself? Is he ill? What is wrong?"

"Basil isn't ill in body, Ermie, only—oh, it's so dreadful. He found the miniature."

Ermengarde flung herself back again on her bed.

"How sick I am of that stupid miniature!" she muttered.

"Well, Ermie, you want to hear the story about it, don't you? Basil found it, and it had got cracked across, and the poor little sister she does squint so fearfully now, and she——"

"Oh, never mind about that," corrected Ermengarde. With all her care there was a sort of breathless earnestness in her voice. "What did Basil do?"

"He gave the miniature back to Miss Nelson, and of course Miss Nelson was awfully cut up about its being broken, and just at the minute who should come in but Aunt Elizabeth! and she got into a rage, and she asked Basil how he

had got the miniature, and how it was broken, and Basil refused to tell, and there was such a fuss, and father was sent for, and father asked Basil to tell, and Basil refused even to tell father, and father took Basil away to his study, and Miss Nelson doesn't know what happened there, only that dear darling Basil is in disgrace."

"Of course he didn't do it," murmured Ermengarde.

"Do it, Ermie! Basil wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone do such a shabby, shabby, cruel, mean thing as to take away Miss Nelson's dear picture. O Ermie, I thought you at least loved Basil more than anybody, more even than I love him."

"Yes, I do," said Ermengarde; "I love him more than anybody else in the world. Now Margie, if you don't mind leaving the room, in case you happen to be dressed, I'll get up."

"Yes," answered Marjorie, "I'll go away at once." She trotted out of the room.

"I must make up my mind to do it," she said to herself when she reached the landing. "Perhaps Ermie will believe then that I love him a little bit. There's no help for it at all. It's just a plain case of horrid duty, and there's no getting out of it."

Marjorie ran off in the direction of her

father's room. She had to push aside the oak doors, and she had to go softly, for Aunt Elizabeth was now at home, and the part of the house behind the oak doors was no longer the children's property. Marjorie ran softly down the long corridor, and when she reached her father's door, she put her ear against the keyhole.

"I mustn't go in until he is up," she said to herself. "I must wait until I hear a little noise. Perhaps when he's shaving he'll have time to listen to me."

Marjorie's little heart was now beating fast enough, for she was dreadfully afraid that Aunt Elizabeth would come out of the bedroom at the other side of the passage, and order her back to the schoolroom regions.

"Oh, I do hope father won't be dreadfully lazy this morning," she murmured. At last welcome sounds from within reached her ears. Mr. Wilton had evidently retired into his bathroom. Presently steps were distinctly audible in the dressing-room: now Marjorie could venture softly to turn the handle of the great bedroom door, it yielded to her pressure, and she somewhat timidly entered. Mr. Wilton was in his dressing-room, the door of which was ajar, and Marjorie had come some distance into the outer room before he heard her.

"Who is there?" he asked suddenly.

"Please, father, it's me; it's Maggie."

"Come along in, and say good-morning, Maggie. I hope you are getting all your possessions together for our visit to Glendower. I shall take the twelve o'clock train. We'll arrive at four."

"Yes, father." Marjorie was now standing by her father's dressing-table. He was shaving, and in consequence his sentences were a little jerky.

"What a quiet Maggie," he said suddenly, looking down at her. "You're delighted to come, aren't you, little one?"

"I was—I *loved* it. Please, father, I don't want to go now."

"You don't want to go!" Mr. Wilton laid down his razor and looked almost severely into Marjorie's honest but now clouded face. "You don't want to go? Tut!" he repeated. "Don't talk nonsense—you know you are all agog to be off!"

"So I was, but I'm not now. I've changed my mind. That's why I've come in here, and why I'm bothering you while you are shaving."

"You don't bother me, Maggie; you're a good little tot. But about going to Glendower, it's all settled. You're to come, so run away and tell Hudson to put up your finery."

"Father, I want you to let Ermie go instead of me."

"No, that I won't: she has been a very disobedient girl. Run away, now, Maggie: it's all settled that you are to go."

"But Ermie was asked in the first instance?"

"Yes, child, yes; but I've explained matters to Lady Russell."

"And Lilias *is* Ermie's friend."

"What a little pleader you are, Maggie. Ermie should be a good girl, and then she'd have the treats."

"Father, couldn't you punish me instead of her? That is sometimes done, isn't it?"

"Sometimes, Maggie. But I think homeguarde would be all the better for going through the punishment she richly merits."

"Truly, father, I don't think so, and I know Ermie so well. I know, father, she's awfully unhappy, and she's getting so cross and hard, and perhaps this would soften her. I can't make out what's up with her, but I think this might soften her. *Do* try it, father; do, please father."

"Come and sit by me for a moment on this sofa, Maggie. I see you're frightfully in earnest, and you're a dear good child. Everyone speaks well of you, Maggie, so I'm bound in honor to hear you out. You'll tell me

the whole truth, whatever it is, won't you, Maggie?"

"Oh, won't I just! What a dear, darling father you are! Nearly as nice as the birthday father!"

"*Nearly*, puss? Not quite, eh? Well, you suit me uncommonly well, and it is a comfort to have an honest outspoken child. What with Ermengarde's disobedience, and Basil's disgraceful want of openness, I scarcely know what to do at times."

"Father, Basil has done nothing wrong."

"Oh, you take his part, eh? You wouldn't, if you had seen that obstinate young dog last night. I see you know all about it, and I may as well tell you, Maggie, that I am deeply displeased with Basil. I am much more angry with him than I am with Ermengarde, for somehow or other I measured him by his mother's standard, and she often said that Basil couldn't be underhand."

"Mother was right," said Marjorie; "he couldn't."

"My dear Maggie, events have proved the reverse. But now we won't discuss this matter. Here, pop under my arm; let's have a cozy five minutes while I listen to all your wonderful reasons for not going to Glendower."

CHAPTER XV.

LILIAS.

GERMENGARDE had just finished her morning toilet when the bedroom door was banged violently open. It shut with a loud report and Marjorie, breathless and triumphant, appeared before her.

"What will you give for some good news?" she said, dancing excitedly up and down. "There, you shall give three guesses. Something so good, *so* jolly. You *will* be delighted. Now guess! What's going to happen?"

Ermengarde was in one of her worst humors. Everything had gone wrong with her. There was a load of oppression and care on her heart, and now she was seriously uneasy about Basil. She was not brave enough to exonerate him by confessing her own sins, but it was torture to her to think that he should be unjustly suspected of anything mean and dishonorable.

"*Do* guess! It's something so delightful. You *will* be pleased," repeated Marjorie, continuing to dance wildly up and down.

"I do wish, Maggie, you'd understand that other people are not in the frantic state of bliss you are in. Your manners lately are too intolerable. I shall ask father if I cannot have a separate bedroom for I will not have you banging in and out of the room in the horrid tomboy way you have. I don't want to hear your good news. It's nothing that can concern me, that I am sure."

"Oh, indeed, truly it concerns you."

"I don't want to hear it. I know you and your raptures. It will be a perfect comfort when you are at Glendower, and I can have a little peace!"

"That's just it! I'm not going to Glendower."

"Oh! You have got into a scrape too? Well, I must say I think it's time your righteous pride should have a fall. I have no patience with little girls who are always in everyone's good books, and who are held up as patterns. But what's the matter? You seem uncommonly delighted at losing your fine treat."

"I would be, if you'd speak ever so little kindly to me, Grace. I really am not the horrid girl you think."

"I don't think anything about you, child."

"Well, you shouldn't say things about me. You shouldn't say exactly you don't think."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, don't begin to moralize! Was that the breakfast gong?"

"Yes. And you'd better be quick eating up your breakfast, Ernie, for you won't have too much time."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you'll have to tell Hudson about your dresses and things. *You* are going to Glendower!"

The dull look left Ermengarde's eyes. They began to sparkle. She stood quite still for a moment. Then she turned slowly round and faced her little sister. All Marjorie's soul was shining out of her face at this moment.

"Do you mean this, Maggie?" asked Ermengarde.

"Of course I mean it. Aren't you glad? Aren't you delighted?"

"But how has it been managed? Father said he'd punish me for talking to Emma Collins, and he said you were to go in my stead."

"Well, now, you are to go instead of me. It's just turned round. Aren't you very glad?"

"Well, I did want to see Lilias. She's more the sort of friend for me than for you: isn't she, Maggie?"

"I suppose so," said Marjorie, suppressing a quick sigh.

"And of course Lady Russell wanted me, not you."

"Yes, I told father I was sure she'd like you best."

"Oh, you spoke to father about it?"

"Why, of course, Ermie."

"Then you haven't got into disgrace yourself?"

"No, it wasn't that—it wasn't because I was in—" Marjorie turned her head away, and tears welled up slowly into her big wide-open gray eyes.

"You did it for me, then?" said Ermengarde. "You gave up your own pleasure for me? I didn't see it until this moment; I didn't really! or I wouldn't have been so cross. Kiss me, Muggie. I'm awfully obliged. But how did you come round father?"

"Oh, never mind now: it's done, and father's quite satisfied. He expects you to go with him, and he told me to tell you to be sure to be ready in good time, as he cannot miss the midday train."

"No fear. I'll be ready. I'm only too glad to get away from the Chase just now. Is that Hudson I see in the passage? Run to her, Muggie, I must speak to her about my white *chiffon* dinner dress."

Marjorie darted away; her face was looking perfectly contented again. She had not ex-

pected any more thanks from Ermengarde, and it was her nature when she did give, to give lavishly. Now she was all eagerness to assist in the necessary preparations for Ermie's sudden visit, and was much more inclined to make large proffers of help than was the somewhat offended Hudson.

"I had your clothes all ready, Miss Marjorie, and I have not got everything Miss Ermengarde requires at a moment's notice."

"Oh, but you will do your very best for Ermie, Hudson, and she can have all my clean handkerchiefs and sashes, and my Maltese gold cross, with the little chain. You *will* help to send her off nice, won't you, Hudson?"

"I'll do anything for your sake, my dear little lady," said the maid.

And Marjorie, well satisfied, trotted down to breakfast in Ermengarde's wake.

The usual party were assembled in the schoolroom, and Ermengarde once more found herself by Basil's side. He just nodded to her when she came in, and then bent his head over "Westward Ho!" which he was reading as he ate his breakfast.

"I wonder if he's coming with me, and if I'm to be treated to these sort of manners all the time," thought Ermengarde. "What *will* Lilias think?"

But just then Marjorie's voice arrested attention. "Don't poke me so, Eric; it isn't me—it's Ermie; she's going."

"Oh, galopshious! And you'll stay at the Chase! I was looking forward to a black time. You and Basil away, and Miss Sulky-face for my sole companion."

"*Do* hush, Eric; you say such horrid unkind things. I won't talk to you or be a bit nice."

Eric continued to clatter in a loud, aggravating whisper. His buzzing words were distinctly audible at the other end of the long table. Ermengarde heard herself spoken of as Miss Sulky-face, but she was far too contented with the present state of affairs to mind what such a very unimportant person as Eric said about her. Basil raised his head for a moment from his book.

"Are you going to Gleudower instead of Maggie?" he asked, darting a quick glance at his sister.

Her heart swelled with sudden pain at his tone.

"Yes," she said. Her voice was humble, and almost deprecating.

"Maggie has given up her wishes, then?"

"I am going instead of Maggie," said Ermengarde, her manner once more proud and defiant.

Basil resumed his reading of "Westward Ho!" Miss Nelson called to him to say that his breakfast was getting cold. The moment she spoke, he shut up his book.

"I don't wish to eat anything more, Miss Nelson," he said. "And I want to know if you will excuse me, and let me leave the table now. I wish to say a word to father before he leaves the study."

"You can certainly go, Basil," replied the governess.

He went away at once. A moment later, Basil was standing in his father's presence.

"Do you expect me to go with you to-day to Glendower, father?" he asked.

Mr. Wilton was reading an important letter. He looked up impatiently.

"Yes," he said. "You and Marjorie—I mean you and Ermengarde are to come."

"But I have displeased you, and this is a—a pleasure trip."

Mr. Wilton threw down his letter.

"Look here, Basil," he said, "you are too old to be punished in the sort of way I punish Ermengarde, or Marjorie, or Eric."

"I am only a year older than Ermengarde."

"Don't contradict me, sir. I repeat, you are too old, and you are different. I have regarded you hitherto as a manly sort of fellow, and even

after last night I cannot treat you as a child. Come to Glendower; only understand that, until you explain yourself fully, you suffer from my displeasure."

"If that is so, father"—Basil's lips quivered, his dark eyes glowed with pain—"if that is so, I would rather stay at Wilton Chase."

"Then stay. Until you are once more the frank fellow I have always regarded you, your movements do not interest me."

"I will stay at home then, father."

"Very well."

Mr. Wilton opened another letter, and began to read it. Basil lingered for a moment, as if he hoped for another softer word; then he turned on his heel and left the room.

In due time Ermengarde and her father started on their journey. Ermengarde carried away with her every conceivable bit of finery which Marjorie could stow into her trunk, and Hudson, finding herself helpless to stem the tide of events, at last rose to the occasion, and did her best to send off her young lady suitably prepared for her visit.

Ermengarde looked very pretty and graceful as she seated herself beside her father in the carriage, and although the children were conspicuous by their absence, and there were no sorrowful looks to witness her exit, she did

not concern herself very much over such trivial matters.

Marjorie's farewell was all that was warm and affectionate, and as it was Mr. Wilton's fashion to forgive absolutely when he did forgive, Ermengarde had a very comfortable journey.

The travelers arrived in good time at Glendower, and Ermengarde really forgot all the worries, the miseries, the sins of the last few days, when Lilias Russell threw her arms round her neck, and warmly bade her welcome.

Lilias was a very beautiful girl. She had that radiant sort of almost spiritual loveliness which is generally accompanied by a very sweet, noble, and upright nature. Her complexion was very fair, her eyes large, soft, and brown; her hair was the finest, palest gold. She was a slightly made girl, but she had no look of ill-health about her. On the contrary, her elastic young figure was full of strength and vigor. She was a great favorite with all her friends, for she was unselfish, loving, and straightforward. She was slow to think evil of people, and was generally affectionately rapturous over the girls and boys who came to visit her at Glendower. Although the only child of very wealthy parents, she was too simple-minded to be spoiled. She received lots

of flatteries, but they did her no harm, because she failed to see them. Her beautiful face was praised to her many times, but no one yet had seen a conscious or conceited expression cross it.

"I'm delighted you have come, Ernie," she said, "but I scarcely expected you, for mother had a letter from your father, who said he was obliged to bring Maggie instead."

Ernie made no reply. There is no saying what reply she would have made, but at that moment Mr. Wilton stepped forward and answered Lilias's look of inquiry himself.

"Maggie gave up her pleasure to Ernie," he said. "She is an unselfish child, and she saw how very much Ernie wished to spend a few days with you, Lilias."

"How sweet of Maggie!" replied Lilias. "I do think she is one of the very dearest little girls in the world. Of course I'm delighted to have you with me, Ernie—you do; but I only wish your father had brought Maggie, too."

"And where is my special favorite, Basil?" asked Lady Russell, who had been listening with an amused smile to the above conversation.

"Basil is not in my good graces at present," replied Mr. Wilton. "Pardon me. I make no complaints. He was free to come, but he

elected to stay at home; under the circumstances, I think his choice was wise."

Lady Russell and Mr. Wilton walked slowly away together, and Lilias linked her hand affectionately through Ermengarde's arm.

"If there is a mystery, you will tell me about it presently," she said, "and I am not going to worry you now. I am so pleased to have you with me, Ernie, and there are a whole lot of things I am going to consult you about. But first of all, just come to my grotto. I want you to see in what a pretty pattern I have arranged the shells. Here we are; enter, fair and welcome guest! Oh, you must stoop your tall head a little, Ernie. Pride must bend when it enters a humble grotto like mine. Now then, look around you."

Ermengarde was feeling tired, hot, and thirsty. She had hoped to have been treated to nice grown-up tea in one of the drawing-rooms and she felt just a little annoyed at being invited all at once to look at Lilias's stupid shells, or to behold the most charming grotto that was ever built. Ermengarde had no love for natural history and found as she was of Lilias, she felt just a wee bit cross.

But the moment she entered the grotto, the clouds fled like magic from her face. There were shells, of course, and sea-weeds, and a deep

pool which contained sea-anemones, and into which a fountain continually dripped. But there was also tea on a charming little rustic table, and two rustic easy-chairs, and two egg-shell china cups and saucers, and a wee silver jug full of cream, and a dish of hot muffins, and a little basket full of grapes and peaches.

Lilias watched her friend's face.

"She wants her tea, poor Ernie does," she whispered to herself; "I know Maggie would have rushed at the shells first of all, and she'd have asked me a thousand questions about my sea-anemones and my fountain. Still, it's perfectly natural that Ernie should be thirsty and want her tea."

So the two little friends sat down, and had a very cozy and merry time together.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BEAUTIFUL DRESS.

HAT evening, as Ermengarde was standing in her room, surveying with critical eyes the heaps of finery she had brought with her, Lilias knocked at her door.

"Come in," said Ermengarde.

Lilias had on a blue flannel dressing-jacket, and her long, bright, golden hair was streaming down her back.

"I've rushed in to tell you," she exclaimed excitedly, "we are both to come down to dinner to-night. Two guests have disappointed mother. She has just had a telegram; Colonel Vavasour is ill, and of course his wife can't leave him, so you and I are to fill the vacant places at table. I do hope you won't mind, Ermie."

"I?" said Ermengarde, her eyes sparkling. "Oh, no; I shan't mind; I like dining with grown people. I think it will be rather fun."

"It's sweet of you to take it in that way," said Lilias. "I had planned a lovely walk by the lake, and we might have got into the boat,

and brought in some water-lilies. Late dinner takes a long, long time, and it will be much too dark to go to the lake when it is over."

"I don't mind, really," repeated Ermengarde. She did not want to tell her friend that her worldly little soul infinitely preferred late dinner and a talk with some of the grown-up guests to a ramble with Lilias by the side of the lake.

"We can go to the lake another time, Lilias," she said, "and it seems only right to oblige your mother now."

"Thank you for putting it in that way to me," said Lilias. She went up to Ermengarde and kissed her. "What have you got to wear?" she asked. "I know mother would like such young girls as we are to be dressed very simply. I shall just put on a white muslin, and a white silk sash round my waist."

"Oh, I have a white dress, too," said Ermengarde, in a careless tone. "I am sure I shall manage very well."

Her dark eyes grew brighter and brighter as she spoke.

"I must not stay to chat with you, Ermie," said Lilias, looking at her friend with admiration. "Mother is so afraid you will miss your maid, but you shall have as much of Petite's time as ever I can possibly spare."

"Who is Petite?" asked Ermengarde.

"Oh, she's my dear little maid. We brought her over from France last year. She was never out anywhere before, and I'm so fond of her. Her name is Lucile Marat, but I call her Petite, because she is on a small scale, and so neat in every way. It was she unpacked your things. I'll send her to you in a minute."

Lilias ran out of the room, and Ermengarde, closing the door, opened a long drawer at the bottom of the wardrobe, and taking out her white *chiffon* dress, viewed it with great complacency. This dress had been given to Ermengarde by Aunt Elizabeth; she had brought it from Paris, intending to wear it at a county ball herself, but finding it too juvenile, she had handed it on to her niece. The local dressmaker had cut it down to fit Ermengarde, and ever since she possessed it, Ermie had sighed and longed for the occasion when she might don the lovely robe.

The dress was in truth an exquisite one: it was delicately spangled with what looked like dewdrops, and had a great deal of rich soft silk introduced here and there, but if it was too young for Aunt Elizabeth, it was a great deal too old for Ermie. Its voluminous and graceful gallows of white were not suited to her slim little figure. It was a grown girl's dress, and Ermie was only a child.

Still the occasion, the longed-for, the sighed-for occasion, when she might dress herself in Aunt Elizabeth's white *chiffon*, had arrived.

Ermie pulled the dress out of the drawer, shook out its folds, and regarded it with rapture.

There came a modest knock at the room door, and Petite, got up in truly French fashion, entered. She was a rosy-cheeked, round-faced girl, with sparkling black eyes, and rolls of black hair, picturesquely arranged on the top of her head.

"I hope she understands English," thought Ermengarde. "French is not my strong point, and I really must get her to dress my hair in some grown-up fashion to-night."

Petite soon, however, relieved Ermengarde's fear.

"I have come to help you, ma'mselle," she said in her cheerful tones. "Will you let me brush out your hair?"

"Thank you," said Ermie. "I want you to dress it on the top of my head, please—*high*—something like an old picture—you understand?"

Petite's eyes sparkled.

"I know what you mean," she said. "Pouffed, ever so—like the pictures of the ancient ladies in the picture-gallery."

"Yes," said Ermengarde. "I want my hair to be arranged like a young grown-up lady. You understand?"

"Perfectly, ma'mselle. I will go and fetch hair-pins. But we haven't too much time; Ma'mselle Lilias is dressed. She wears her hair straight down her back."

Ermengarde said nothing. The mysteries of the toilet proceeded, and at the end of half an hour Lilias knocked at her friend's door.

Ermengarde was now arrayed in the white *chiffon* dress: it touched the ground, and swept away in a short train at the back. It was cut a little open at the neck, and the round childish arms were bare to the elbow. Round her throat Ermengarde had tied Marjorie's Maltese cross, and among the masses of her high piled-up hair rested a lovely pearl butterfly. The dress was most unsuitable, but the childish face, colored high and with excitement and gratified vanity, looked quite radiant in its loveliness.

Petite was in ecstasies.

"Ma'mselle looks as if she had stepped out of one of the old picture-frames," she said. "Look how beautiful I have contrived her hair to sit."

Lilias did not say much. She was an intensely polite girl, and she crushed back the

exclamation of dismay which rose to her lips. Her own appearance was the extreme of simplicity. Her muslin frock was short; her little white shoes and silk stockings were visible. Round her waist she wore a plain white sash, and her golden hair fell in masses down her back.

While Petite was dressing her, Ermengarde's silly heart was mounting on higher and higher wings of ecstatic delight. But when she looked at Lilias, an uneasy sensation came over her for the first time.

"Come," said Lilias, in her gentle voice, "we'll go down to the drawing-room, and stay together near one of the windows. I don't suppose anyone will take us in to dinner; but then, dear, and mother, we'll take one another in."

"Do you like my dress?" suddenly asked Ermengarde.

"Well, Ermie, isn't it just a little old?"

"Nonsense, Aunt Elizabeth gave it to me. She ought to know, I suppose."

Ermengarde did not care to mention then that the dress was a cast-off garment of her Aunt Elizabeth's.

The two girls went downstairs hand in hand. Ermie's long dress and train made her feel awkward. She began to be more and

more sure that her evening attire, notwithstanding its great beauty, was unsuitable. She hoped no one would specially notice her. She felt uncomfortable as she saw several pairs of eyes fixed upon her, as she and Lilias walked across the drawing-room.

The two girls got behind the shelter of a curtain, and Ermengarde rejoiced in the fact that her father had not yet come downstairs.

A few more minutes went by; the guests arrived in twos and threes—then dinner was announced. As Lilias had foretold, she and Ermengarde were to take each other in to dinner. They were the last to enter the dining-room. Lady Russell had arranged that the two little girls were to sit together, but at the very last moment some change was made, and Ernie to her horror found herself between her father and a stout old gentleman, who was inclined to regard her as an overdressed, but pretty little doll.

Mr. Wilton never fussed about dress, but he had a keen eye for the proprieties. He saw at a glance that Lilias looked exactly as she ought, and that Ermengarde did not, but he could not tell where the difference lay. Ernie as a rule was one of the neatest of little maids. To-night she was not untidy, and yet—he could not tell why—she looked all wrong.

Mr. Wilton sighed, thought of his dead wife, wondered how he could ever manage his fast growing-up family, and then slightly turning his back on Ermie, tried to forget his cares in conversation with his neighbor on his other side.

The fat old gentleman began to talk to Ermengarde.

"Home for the holidays, eh, my dear?" he began, half-winking at her.

"I don't go to school," answered Ermengarde. She flushed angrily, and her reply was in her primmest voice.

The fat old gentleman finished his soup calmly. Ermie's prim indignation amused him. He glanced from her childish face to her grown-up head, and then said in a semi-confiding whisper: "Tell me, do you consider a classical education essential to the development of women's brains?"

"Oh, I don't know," stammered poor Ermie.

"Then you're not a Girton girl?"

"No; why do you ask?" answered Ermengarde. She began to feel a little flattered. The old gentleman must certainly consider her quite grown-up.

"Well," he replied, with another comical twinkle in his eyes, "I thought you seemed so intelligent and although you have a young face,

you have somehow or other an old way about you. You'll forgive my speaking frankly, my dear, but I notice that most old-young girls attend some of the colleges."

Ermengarde felt delighted. She changed her mind about the fat old gentleman, and began to regard him as a most agreeable person. He considered her face remarkable for intelligence, and although she was quite grown up, she looked sweetly youthful. She leant back in her chair, and toyed with her food.

"I'm not very old," she began.

"Not more than eighteen, I should think," replied the old gentleman.

Ermengarde gave vent to a silvery laugh.

"Eh? You're not more than that, are you?" asked her companion.

"No, sir," she answered. "I am not more than eighteen."

Although he was talking very earnestly to his neighbor, Mr. Wilton heard his daughter's laugh. It sounded to him a little forced and strained. His undefined sensation of discomfort increased. He turned and looked at Ermengarde. There certainly was something quite unusual about her. Now he raised his eyes to her hair.

"Ernie!" he exclaimed, "what *have* you done to your head? My dear child, what a show you have made of yourself!"

His voice was quite clear enough for the old gentleman to hear him.

Ermengarde blushed painfully. She muttered something inaudible, and looked down.

"What possessed you to make such a guy of yourself?" continued her father, in a vexed tone, which was very low now. "A little girl like you aping young ladyhood! I am very much annoyed, Ermengarde: I did not think you could be so silly."

Then he turned his back once more, and addressed his neighbor on the other side.

Poor Ernie felt her eyes swimming in tears. The mortification to which her father had subjected her just at her moment of triumph was very bitter. She could not eat a delicious *entrée* which was being offered to her at that moment, and it is possible that, notwithstanding her pride, she might have given way completely to her outraged feelings had not the old gentleman come to her rescue. He was sorry for the poor little maid who had aped the ways of the grown-up. He dropped his quizzical manner, and entered into a pleasant conversation. He drew Ermengarde on to speak of her home, and in especial of her brother Basil, and he thought the little girlish face very charming indeed when Ernie spoke eagerly of her favorite brother.

The rest of the dinner passed off fairly well,

and Ermengarde hoped she might be able to retire into a corner when she got into the drawing-room, and so escape any more of her father's censure.

This, however, was difficult, for Lady Russell kept both the girls forward, and in especial introduced Ermengarde to several friends of her own. Some of these ladies knew her mother, and they looked kindly at Ermie, and only whispered together behind her back about the extraordinary costume the poor little girl was got up in.

These ladies evidently blamed Ermengarde's father, and spoke of her as a sadly neglected child.

Ermie felt that the ladies were whispering about her, and she began to hate the beautiful Indian dress, and to long to tear it off her back.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MORE BEAUTIFUL FACE.

WO tall girls were standing near the piano: one had just sung a song in a very brilliant style, the other was complimenting her: the gentlemen had not yet come in.

"Flora, do look at that queer little personage over there!" exclaimed the singer, glancing in Ermengarde's direction. "Did you ever see such a little comicality? Why, she can't be more than twelve years old, and she is dressed in much older style than you or I."

"Stop, Kate, I'm sure she hears you," said Flora.

"I don't care if she does, conceited little monkey. Who in the world is she?"

"Her name is Ermengarde Wilton. Yes, of course, the dress is unsuitable, but small piece of gorgeousness that she is, I'd give a good deal to possess her handsome face; and so would you, for the matter of that, Kate."

Ermengarde was standing near a window.

Now she pushed a muslin curtain aside, and hid herself behind its folds.

"There! She did hear you this time, Flora," said Kate.

"I meant her to," replied the other. "You were humiliating her so horribly, Kate."

The two girls whispered a little longer, then they parted company. Ermengarde stood behind the shelter of the window curtain. Her heart was beating fast, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes had a triumphant light in them.

Yes, she had heard what those horrid girls were saying. She had heard every word. They had abused her dress, but they had praised her face. This praise made up for all. What mattered the dress which could be so easily removed, compared with the face which would remain.

Ermengarde's heart thrilled within her at the delicious words of flattery. These grown-up girls envied *her!* Oh, she could bear anything after that.

She was standing thus, thinking her own thoughts, when the light swish of silken drapery near caused her to look round, and to her astonishment the girl who was called Flora stood in the shelter of the window by her side.

"I hope I am not crowding you," she said in a gracious voice to Ermengarde. "It is so hot in

the drawing-room; I have just come here to get cool before the gentlemen come in."

"You don't disturb me at all," said Ermengarde.

"Thank you. Are you Miss Wilton? I think you must be. My mother knows your father very well."

"And your name is Flora something?" answered Ermengarde, looking up with proud distance in her face. "And you were speaking about me to a girl called Kate, and you abused my dress, and said that I was a little piece of gorgeousness, and that I was only twelve years old. I am not twelve—I am fourteen and three months."

"Oh, my dear child, you should not have been eavesdropping."

"I wasn't. You spoke out very loud. I thought you knew I must hear you."

"Dear, dear, I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt your feelings, really, Miss Wilton. Of course the dress is *lovely*. Catch Kate or me aspiring to anything half so fine. But then, you *did* look very young in it. Are you really fourteen? You don't look it."

"Yes, I am fourteen and three months."

"Of course that makes a great difference. Come, now, let's be friends. My name is Flora St. Leger, and mother and I are going to

stay at Glendower for a couple of days. Are you staying here?"

"Yes, with my father. We came to-day."

"Oh, I suppose you are Lilias Russell's friend. Isn't she a prim little piece?"

"I don't know," answered Ermengarde angrily. "I only consider that she is the dearest and most beautiful girl in the world."

"Oh, folly! she can't hold a candle to you. I'd like to see you when you're dressed for your first drawing-room. You know, Ermengarde—I may call you Ermengarde, may I not? I *did* say something very nice about your face, even when I abused your dress. You heard that part too, didn't you, sly monkey?"

"Yes," said Ermie, in a low voice. Then she added, "But it is not true about my being more beautiful than Lilias, and I don't like you even to say it."

"Well, just you don't help facts: Lilias is very well in her way; you are twice as striking. Oh, there comes Frenger Martineau. I promised to-day his arrangements for him: he will sing some Teutonic songs in a minute. You like to hear him sing. He has a remarkably fine tenor voice for an amateur."

Flora St. Leger glided away from the recess of the window, and Ermengarde was left alone

She did not mind this in the least, her meditations were so pleasant; and Flora had given her such agreeable food for thought, that she was quite delighted to be able to have a quiet few minutes to think over everything. She had quite forgiven Flora's *unkind* words for the sake of her *flattering* words. Flora had said the sort of things that Suzy had often regaled her with before, but how much more important were the honeyed speeches coming from the lips of this grown-up and beautiful young lady. Ermengarde felt herself quite in love with Flora. Poor Lilias was nothing, compared to the friend she had just made. She was glad to know that Flora was going to spend a couple of days at Woodhouse. She earnestly hoped that she might see a good deal of her during these few days.

The evening passed somehow, and Ermie managed to escape to her room without again meeting her father.

Petite was helping her to undress, when to her surprise Lady Russell herself came in.

"My dear little Ermengarde," she said. She went up to the young girl and kissed her affectionately. "You can leave us, Petite," said Lady Russell to the maid. When they were alone, she turned to Ermie.

"My love, I am sorry to appear interfering, but you are a motherless little girl. Your dress to-night was very unsuitable."

"Aunt Elizabeth gave it to me," said Ermengarde, pouting.

"Yes, my dear; but, pardon me, we won't go into the question of how you came by the dress. You are at least ten years too young to be dressed in a fanciful costume of that kind. Your father does not wish you to wear that dress again, Ermie, nor to arrange your hair as you did to-night. Have you got a simple white dress with you, my child?"

"No," said Ermie, still pouting and frowning; "I thought the white *chiffon* was exactly what I needed."

"Poor child, you sadly miss your mother. Well, my love, don't do it again; that's all. I will get Petite to alter one of Lilias's frocks for you to wear to-morrow evening. Now, good night, dear; sleep sound. I am glad you have come to keep our Lilias company for a few days."

Lady Russell kissed Ermengarde and left her. She took no notice of the little girl's sullen face, nor of her rude manner. She went away looking what she was, a gracious motherly woman.

"I am deeply sorry, both for Ermengarde

and her father," she said to herself. "Anyone can see that the poor man does not know how to manage all those children. Marjorie takes after her sweet mother, but Ermengarde! she is not an easy child to influence, and yet what a beautiful face she has!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE TOILS.

THE summer at Glendower was always a gay time. The house was usually full of guests, and as there were horses and carriages, and a yacht and a sailboat, as well as two or three rowboats, the guests had certainly all possible advantages of locomotion.

The next morning was a glorious one, and Lilias and Ernie, after breakfasting together in Lilias's own special boudoir, put on their shady hats, and went out to walk about the grounds. The air was so delicious, and Lilias was so sweet and bright and unselfish, that it was impossible for Ernie not to feel in the best of spirits.

She ceased to desire to be grown up, and was satisfied to run races with Lilias in the simple pink cambric frock, which suited her infinitely better than the gorgeous *chiffon*.

Ermengarde's life was not without care just then, but at this moment she forgot her

anxieties about Susy and Basil, and the broken miniature. She forgot her mortification of the night before, and looked what she was, a happy child.

Lilias was talking eagerly about the plans for the day's entertainment. The whole party were to drive to a certain point about eight miles from Glendower. There they were to picnic, and afterward, with the tide in their favor, would return home by water.

"And mother says I may drive my own ponies," said Lilias. "You haven't seen my Shetlands yet, have you, Ermie? Oh, they are such lovely pets, and father has given me real silver bells for their harness."

Ermengarde was about to make a reply, when a voice was heard calling Lilias.

"I'll be back in a minute, Ermie," said Lilias. "I suppose mother wants me to arrange about something. Don't go far away; I'll be with you directly."

She ran off, and Ermengarde, finding a rustic bench under a tree, sat down and looked around her. She had scarcely done so, when she was joined by Flora St. Leger.

"I saw you alone, and I rushed out to you, my love," said the young lady. "I want to speak to you so badly. Where can we go to be by ourselves?

"But I am waiting here for Lilias," said Ermengarde.

"Oh, never mind. What does it matter whether Lilias finds you here when she comes back or not? She doesn't really want you, and I do."

Now this was all immensely flattering, for Flora was quite grown up, and Ermengarde had already lost her silly little heart to her.

"I should like to oblige you," she said.

"Well, *do* oblige me! Let us fly down this side-walk. There's a shrubbery at the further end, where we shall be quite alone. Come, give me your hand."

Ermengarde could not resist. A moment later she and Flora were pacing up and down in the shrubbery.

"Ermengarde," said Miss St. Leger eagerly, "*are* you going to that stupid stupid picnic to-day?"

"Why, of course," said Ermengarde, looking up in astonishment.

"You must call me Flora if you like, my dear love. What a sweet, pretty pet you are! Now that I look at you by daylight, I think it's a perfect sin that, with a face like yours, you should have to wear short frocks."

Ermie sighed. Miss St. Leger's tone was full of delicious sympathy, and when the next

moment she slipped her arm round the little girl's waist. Ernie experienced quite a thrill of delight.

"I have fallen in love with you, that's a fact," said Miss St. Leger; "but now, about that picnic; you don't really want to go?"

"Oh, yes, Flora. Lilias is going to drive me in her pony-carriage."

"Lilias! Let her take a child like herself. You ought to be with the grown-ups."

"Everyone treats me exactly as if I were a child," said Ermengarde. "I do think it's a great shame, for I don't feel in the least like one."

"Of course you don't, pet. Now listen to me. *I'm* not going to this stupid, horrid picnic."

"Aren't you, Flora?"

"No, I'm going to stay at home, and I want you to stay with me. You won't be dull, I promise you."

"But what excuse can I give?"

"Oh, say you're tired, or have a headache, or something of that sort."

"But I'm not tired, and I haven't got a headache."

Flora pouted.

"After all, you are only a baby," she said. "I made a mistake; I thought you were different."

Ermengarde colored all over her face.

"Do you really, really want me, Flora?" she asked timidly.

"Of course I do, sweet pet; now you will oblige me, won't you?"

"I'd certainly like to, Flora."

"That's a darling. Go back to the house, and lie down on your bed and, when Lilias calls you at the last moment, say you're tired, and you'd like to stay quiet. Of course you *are* tired, you know; you look it."

"I suppose I am a little bit," said Ermengarde. Her heart felt like lead. Her gayety had deserted her, but she was in the toils of a much older and cleverer girl than herself.

She stole softly back to the house, and when Lilias found her lying on her bed, she certainly told no untruth when she said that her head ached, for both head and heart ached, and she hated herself for deceiving her sweet little friend.

The picnic people departed, quietness settled down over the house, and Ermie, who had cried with vexation at the thought of losing that delightful drive and day of pleasure, had dropped into a dull kind of doze, when a knock came to her room door, and Miss St. Leger entered.

"Now, little martyr," she said, in a cheerful

voice, "jump up, make yourself smart, put on your best toggery, forget your headache, and come downstairs with me. We are going to have some fun on our own account, now, sweet.

"O Flora, what are you going to do?"

"First of all, we'll have some lunch, and afterward we'll stroll through some woods at the back of the house, and I'll tell you some of my adventures in London last season. Oh, my dear, I did have a time of it! Four entertainments often in one evening! That's what you'll be going through, Ernie, in a year or two."

"Is it?" said Ernie gayly. Her eyes did not sparkle any more. Somehow Flora did not seem as fascinating to her as she had done an hour ago. Elias's disappointed face would come back again and again to her memory. She rose, however, and under Flora's supervision put on the smartest of her morning frocks, and went downstairs to lunch.

When the meal had come to an end, and the events had withdrawn, Ernie asked Flora another question.

"Are we *only* going to walk in the woods?" she said. "Is that *all* you asked me to stay at home for!"

"*All*, you silly puss? Well, no, it isn't quite all. We are going to have tea with some

friends of mine. We are to meet them in the woods—very nice people—you'll be charmed with them. We're all going to have a gypsy tea together in the woods."

"But, Flora, I thought you hated picnics?"

"Oh, what a little innocent goose! I hate some kinds. Not the kind I'm going to take you to. Now run upstairs, and put on your hat. It is time for us to be strolling out."

"But, Flora——"

"No more of your 'buts'—go and get ready. Ah, my sweet child, frowns don't become that charming little face of yours. Now, off with you: put on your most becoming hat, and let us set forth."

Ermengarde walked upstairs as if her feet were weighted with lead. The uneasy feeling, which had begun to arise in her heart when Flora proposed that she should tell a fib in order to remain at home, deepened and deepened. Ermengarde had lots of faults, but she was a little lady by birth and breeding, and it suddenly occurred to her that Flora's flatteries were fulsome, and that Flora herself was not in what her father would call good style. She was not at all brave enough, however, now, to withstand her companion. She put on her white shady hat, drew gauntlet gloves over her hands, caught up her parasol, and ran downstairs.

Flora was waiting for her. Flora's eyes were bright, and her cheeks flushed.

"Now come," she said. "You'll enjoy yourself so much, Ernie, and we must be quick, for we must be back again in the house before our friends return from their picnic."

"O Flora, are you doing anything wrong?"

Flora's face got crimson all over.

"I was mistaken in you, Ermengarde," she said. "I thought you were quite a different sort of girl. I thought you were the kind of girl I could make a friend of. I said so to Kate last night. I offended poor Kate. I made her cry when I said, 'If Ermengarde Wilton was only a year or two older, she'd sympathize with me. I never saw such sympathetic eyes in anyone's face.' Kate was mad with jealousy, but I only wish I had her here now, poor Kate!"

"O Flora, you know I don't mean to be unkind."

"Of course you don't, love: you were only a silly little goose. Now, come along, we have no time to lose."

Flora took Ermengarde's hand and the two girls soon found themselves in the magnificent woods at the back of Glendower. These woods covered many acres of land, and were the great pride of the beautiful old place. There were woods at Wilton Chase, but not like these, and

Ermengarde stopped several times to exclaim and admire.

Oh, how Basil would have enjoyed this walk! How easily he would have climbed those trees! how merrily he would have laughed! how gay his stories would have been! And Basil might have been here today, but for Ermengarde; he might have been here, driving and riding with Lilias; enjoying the woods, and the sea, and the picnic fun.

Basil, who was the best of all boys, the best, and the most honorable, was at home in disgrace because of her. Ernie's heart beat heavily. Her footsteps slackened. She scarcely heard Flora's gay chatter.

After walking a mile or so, the girls found themselves in the midst of a clearing in the woods. Here some carriages and horses were drawn up, and a gay party of girls, one or two round-faced and stout matrons, and a few young men were standing together.

The girls and the young men raised a noisy shout when they saw Flora, and rushed to meet her.

"How good of you to come, Florrie! We were half afraid you couldn't manage it."

"Oh, I promised last night," said Flora hastily. "I thought George told you. How do you do, George? Maisie, let me introduce to

you my great friend, Miss Wilton. Miss Wilton, Miss Burroughs." Then Flora tripped on in front by the side of the clumsy-looking George, and Ernie found herself standing face to face with Miss Burroughs. She was a loud-voiced, vulgar-looking girl.

"Come along," she said almost roughly to her little companion. "I wonder what Flora meant by walking off in that fashion. Well, I don't suppose you want me to chaperon you, Miss—— I forget your name."

"Wilton," said Ernengarde in a haughty voice.

"Miss Wilton! I don't know why Flora left you on my hands in that style. She just introduced us and rushed off—just like Florrie, so independent and selfish. I never know anyone so selfish. But I have my own fun to see after. Oh, there's Florrie in the distance. I'll shout after her. Flora! Florrie! Flora St. Leger!"

Flora turned.

"What is it, Maisie?" she screamed back.

"What am I to do with Miss Wilton? I'm going for a long walk with the Slater girls. She can't possibly go so far, and besides, we don't want children."

"Isn't Fanny here?" screamed back Flora.

"Yes, and Tootsie."

"Well, let her stay with Fanny and Tootsie for a bit."

Flora turned and walked down the hill rapidly with her companion. Maisie caught hold of Ermengarde's hand, and began to run with her under the trees.

Presently she came across a stout little girl of about eleven, accompanied by a stouter little boy who might be a year older.

"Fanny," said Maisie, "this child's name is Wilton. She'll stay and play with you and Tootsie for a bit. Now be good children, all of you. Ta-ta! I'll be back in time for tea."

Maisie vanished round a corner, and Ermengarde found herself alone with Fanny and Tootsie.

CHAPTER XIX.

SOME PEOPLE WHO DO NOT MATTER.

THEY were not an agreeable-looking pair; they had evidently been dining, and their faces were sticky. They had also been quarreling, for they cast scowling glances at each other and were in far too bad a temper to be civil to the newcomer.

"I don't want her to play with us," said Tootsie, and he half turned his back.

"I'm sure then she shan't play with me," said Fanny. "I don't wish to play with anyone, I'm sick of play. It's just like that horrid Maisie."

"She isn't a bit more horrid than you and Tootsie!" suddenly remarked Ermengarde, finding her voice, and speaking with what seemed to the two children slow and biting emphasis. "You're all horrid together; I never met such horrid people. You are none of you ladies and gentlemen. I wouldn't play with you for the world! Good-by; I'm going home."

Ermengarde turned her back, and began to

walk rapidly away from the picnic party. Whether she would have succeeded in finding her way back to Glendower remains a mystery, for she had not gone a dozen yards before she encountered a stout old lady, who spread out her arms as she approached, and made herself look like a great fan.

"Whither away, now, little maid of the woods?" she said. "Oh, I suppose you are the little girl called Wilton, whom Florrie brought over from Glendower with her. Maisie told me of you."

"I'm going home; please let me pass," said Ermengarde.

"Oh, highty-tighty! not a bit of you, dearie. You'll stay here till Florrie wants to go back. You'd get her into no end of a scrape if you were to leave her now. You must stick to her, my love. It would be unkind to desert poor Florrie in that fashion. I thought Maisie had left you with Fanny and Tootsie."

"Yes, but they are horrid rude children. I could not possibly play with them."

"Well, they are handfuls," said the stout lady. "I'm their mother, so I ought to know. You don't mind staying with me then, love, do you?"

"I'd much rather go home," repeated Ermengarde.

"But you can't do that, my dear child, so there's no use thinking about it. Come, let us walk about and be cozy, and you tell me all about Glendower."

The old lady now drew Ermengarde's slim hand through her arm, and she found herself forced to walk up and down the greensward in her company.

Mrs. Burroughs was a downright sort of person. After her fashion she was kind to Ermie, but it never entered into her head to flatter her. She was a gossiping sort of body, and she wanted the child to recount to her all the intimate she knew about Glendower. Ermengarde had neither the power nor the inclination to describe the goings on at Glendower graphically. The stout lady soon got tired of her short answers, and began to survey her from head to foot in a critical and not too kindly spirit.

"Dear, dear!" she said, "what an overgrown poor young thing you are! But we must all go through the gawky age: we must each of us take our turn. Maisie is just through her bad time, but when she was fourteen, wasn't she a show just! You're fourteen, ain't you, my love?"

"Yes," said Ermengarde.

"Ah, I thought as much! I said so the moment I set eyes on you. I knew it by your

walk. Neither fish, flesh, nor good red herring is a maid of fourteen: she's all right once she passes seventeen, so you take heart, my love. I dare say you'll be a fine girl then."

"Mrs. Burroughs," interrupted Ermengarde, "I really must look for Flora. It is time for us to be going back. I must find her, and if she won't come, I'll go alone."

She wrenched her hand away from the stout lady's arm, and before she could prevent her, began running through the woods to look for Flora.

Miss St. Leger was nowhere in sight, so Ernie, feeling her present position past enduring, determined that, whatever happened, she would go back to Glendower. She was fortunate enough to meet one of the gamekeepers, and guided by his instructions presently found herself back in the house. Weary and stiff, her head aching, she crept up to her room, and threw herself on her bed. Oh, what horrid people Flora knew! oh, what a horrid girl Flora really was!

Ermengarde wondered how she could ever have liked or admired Flora, or made a friend of such a girl. She lay on the bed and listened intently, wondering what would happen if the picnic party returned before Flora chose to put in an appearance. In that case, would she,

Ermengarde, be blamed? Would suspicion attach to her? Would her father discover how deceitfully she had behaved?

"He would send me straight home if he knew it," thought Ermie. "Oh, what a lot of scrapes I've been getting into lately! What with Susy and the miniature, and Miss Nelson and Basil, and now this horrid mean Horn? Oh dear, oh dear! I'm sure I'm not a bit happy. I wish I could get straight somehow, only it's hopeless. I seem to get deeper and deeper into a dark wood every day. Oh dear! there is nothing whatever for me but to hope that things won't be found out."

There came a gentle knock at Ermengarde's door.

"Come in," she said, in a shaking voice. Her fears made her tremble at every sound.

Petite appeared, bringing in a tempting little tray, with tea, and bread-and-butter, and cake. She inquired if Ermengarde knew where Miss St. Leger was. Ermie murmured something which the French maid tried to interpret in vain.

"I'll look for ma'mselle in her room," she said.

She arranged the tea-tray comfortably for Ermie, and withdrew.

The little girl drank her tea: it soothed and comforted her, and she was just falling into a

doze, when her room door was opened without any preliminary knock, and Flora, flushed, panting, and frightened, ran in.

"Ermengarde, they are all returning. They are in the avenue already. Oh, how cruel of you to come home without me! You might have got me into an awful scrape."

"I could not help it, Flora. You should not have left me with such people. They are not at all in our set. Father would not wish me to know them."

"Oh, nonsense! They are as good as any body."

"They are not; they are not good at all. They are vulgar and horrid. I am surprised you should have taken me to see such people."

"Well, well, child, it's all over now. You'll never tell about to-day, will you, Ermengarde?"

"Oh, I suppose not, Flora."

"You *suppose* not? But you must promise faithfully. You don't know what mischief you'd make, if you tell. Promise now, Ermengarde; promise that you won't tell."

"Very well, I promise," replied Ermie, in a tired-out voice.

"That's a darling. I knew you were a pretty sweet little pet. If ever I can do anything for you, Ermie, I will. Kiss me now, love. I hear their voices in the hall, and I must fly."

Flora rushed noisily out of the room, and Ermie breathed a sigh of relief.

That evening at dinner the stout old gentleman was very kind to the little girl who, with her hair down her back, and in a very simple muslin frock, sat by his side. In fact he took a great deal more notice of her than he did of the richly-attired young lady of the previous evening. In the course of the meal he imparted one piece of information to Ermengarde, which put her into extremely good spirits. He told her that Miss St. Leger and her mamma were leaving by a very early train on the following morning. Ermengarde quite laughed when she heard this, and the old gentleman gave her a quick pleased wink, as much as to say, "I thought you were too sensible to be long influenced by the flattery of that young person."

Flora herself avoided Ermengarde all through the evening. She left her entirely to the society of her child friend Lilias, and finally went to bed without even bidding her good-by.

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT DID BASIL MEAN?

IT was rather late on the evening of the second day after Ermengarde and her father had gone to Glendower, that Marjorie, who had been playing with the nursery children, and dancing the big baby about, and otherwise disporting herself after the fashion which usually induces great fatigue, crept slowly upstairs to her room.

She was really awfully tired, for the day had been a hot one, and nurse had a headache, and Clara, the nursery-maid, was away on a holiday. So Marjorie had scarcely breathing time one day long. Now she was going to bed, and the poor little girl looked rather limp and airless as she crept along the passage to her room.

"I do hope Ermie is having a jolly time," she murmured to herself. "I can just fancy how delicious it is at Glendower now. It is such a beautiful, perfect place, just hanging over the sea. And there's going to be a moon. And the moon will shine on the sea, and make it silver."

Marjorie reached her room. She climbed up on the window-ledge and gazed out.

"Yes, the moon is getting up," she said, speaking her thoughts aloud, which was one of her old-fashioned ways. "Oh, how beautiful the moon must look on the sea. I wonder if Ernie is looking at it. Not that poor Ernie cares for moons, or things of that sort; but Lilias does. Who's that? O Basil, is it you? Have you come to talk to me? How awfully jolly! There's lots of room for both of us on the window-ledge. Squeeze in, Basil; there, aren't we snug? Please, may I put my arm round your neck to keep myself tight?"

"All right, Mag. Only don't quite throttle me if you can help it. I thought you had some one with you. I heard you chattering."

"Only to myself. It's a way I have."

"Well, go on, never mind me; I'm nobody."

"Oh, as it's you, just! Why, you are Basil, you're the eldest of us all, and the wisest, and the best."

"Hush, Maggie."

Basil's brow was actually contracted with pain.

"Yes you are," repeated Marjorie, who saw the look, and began to feel her little heart waxing very hot. "O Basil, I meant to spend all to-day and yesterday clearing you;

yes, I did, darling, I did! And I never thought, when it was made to be my plain duty to stay at home, that I was only to help in the nursery all day long. O Basil, I *am* so sorry."

"I don't know what you mean, Maggie by clearing me," said Basil. "Clearing me of what?"

"Why, of course, you have been unjustly accused by father."

"Stop, Maggie. I have not been unjustly accused by anyone."

"Basil, you know you didn't break the little sister's miniature, nor steal it from Miss Nelson. You know you never did!"

Basil put his arm round Marjorie's waist.

"You think not?" he said with a slow, rather glad sort of smile.

"*Think* not? I know you didn't do it! *You* do anything mean and horrid and wicked and shabby like that! *You!* Look here, Basil, even if you told me you did it, I wouldn't believe you."

"All right, Mag; then I needn't say anything."

"Only you might just tell me --"

"What?"

"That you didn't do it. That you are shamefully and falsely suspected."

"No, I could not tell you that, Maggie. My father has every right to be annoyed with me."

"Basil!"

"I can't explain, my dear little Mag. You must just take it on trust with me. I am not falsely accused of anything."

Marjorie unlinked her hand from Basil's clasp. She sprang off the window-ledge on to the floor.

"Look here," she said, "I can't stand this! There's a mystery, and I'm going to clear you. Oh, yes, I will; I am determined!"

"No, Maggie, you are not to clear me. I don't wish to be cleared."

"Basil, what do you mean?"

"What I say. I don't wish to be cleared."

"Then father is to go on being angry with you?"

Basil suppressed a quick sigh.

"I'm afraid he will, for a bit, Maggie," he answered. "He'll get over it; I'm not the first fellow who has had to live a thing down."

"But when you never did the thing?"

"We won't go into that. I've got to live it down. Boys often have rough kinds of things to get through, and this is one. It doesn't matter a bit. Don't fret, Mag. I assure you, I don't feel at all bad about it."

"Oh, look at the moon!" suddenly exclaimed

Marjorie. "Isn't she a lady? isn't she graceful? I wish those trees wouldn't hide her; she'd be so lovely, if we could have a good look at her."

"We can't half see her here," said Basil. "Let's come into father's room. We'll have a splendid view from one of his windows."

Marjorie had forgotten all about her fatigue now. She took Basil's hand, and in a silent ecstasy which was part of her emotional little nature, went with him into the big bedroom where Mr. Wilton slept. They could see splendidly all over the park from here, and as they looked, Marjorie poured out a good lot of her fervent little soul to her favorite brother.

Basil was never a boy to say much about his feelings. Once he stooped down and kissed Marjorie.

"What a romantic little puss you are," he said. Then he told her she must be sleepy, and sent her away to bed.

"But you won't stay in this great lonely room by yourself, Basil."

"This room lonely?" said Basil with a smile. "I used to sit here with mother. And her picture hangs there. I'm glad of the chance of having a good look at it in the moonlight."

"Basil, do let me stay and look at it with you."

"No, Maggie. I don't want to be unkind. You are a dear little thing, but it would help me best to be alone with mother's picture. You don't misunderstand me, Mag?"

"Of course I don't. Good-night, dear Basil; good-night, darling. This talk with you has been as good as two or three days at Glendower."

Marjorie ran off, and Basil was alone. He went and knelt down under the girlish picture of his dead mother. The moonbeams were shining full into the room, and they touched his dark head, and lit up his young mother's fair face. Basil said no words aloud. He knelt quietly for a moment; then he rose, and with tears in his eyes gave another long look at the picture as he turned to leave the room.

CHAPTER XXI.

SUSY'S FEVERISH DESIRE.

UDSON was waiting for Marjorie when she came back to her bedroom.

"I don't know what to do, miss," she said to the little girl. "I'm aware it's Mr. Wilton's orders, but still, what am I to do with the poor woman? She's crying fit to break her heart, and it do seem cruel not to sympathize with her. It's a shame to worry you, Miss Maggie, but you're a very understanding little lady for your years."

"Well, Hudson, I'll help if I can," said Marjorie. "Who's the poor woman? and what is she crying about?"

"It's Mrs. Collins, my dear. It seems that Susy isn't going on at all satisfactory. The doctor says she has a kind of low fever, no way catching, but very bad for the poor little girl. Susy cries quite piteous to see Miss Ermengarde, and it does seem cruel that under the circumstances there should be distinctions in rank."

"But Ernie is away," said Marjorie. "Susy can't see her, however much she wishes to. Did you tell Mrs. Collins that?"

"I did, dear, and she said she daren't go back to the poor child with a message of that sort: that she was so fretted, and contrary, and feverish as it was, that she quite feared what would happen."

"But what's to be done, Hudson? Ernie really is far away, and nothing, nothing that we can do can bring her back to-night."

"I know, Miss Margie, but poor women with only children are apt to be unreasonable, and Mrs. Collins does go on most bitter. She says she knows there's a secret on Susy's mind, and she feels certain sure that the child will never take a turn for the better until she can let out what's preying on her. Mrs. Collins is certain that Miss Ermengarde knows something about Susy, and that they have had some words between them, and she says there'll be no rest for the poor little creature until she and Miss Ernie have made whatever is wrong straight."

Marjorie stood looking very thoughtful.

"It's late, my dear, and you're tired," said the servant. "It seems a shame to worry you. Hadn't you better go to bed?"

"Oh, don't, Hudson," said Marjorie. "What

does it matter about my going to bed, or even if I am a bit tired? I'm thinking about poor Susy, and about Ernie. I've got a thought—I wonder—Hudson, I wish father hadn't said so firmly that Ermengarde was not to see Susy Collins."

"Well, missy, my master is in the right. Little ladies do themselves no good when they make friends and equals of children like Susy. They do themselves no good, and they do still more harm to the poor children, whose heads get filled up with vain thoughts. But that's neither here nor there, Miss Maggie, in the present case. Illness alters everything, and levels all ranks, and if Miss Ermengarde was at home, she ought to go and see Susy, and that without a minute's delay, and your good father would be the very first to tell her so, Miss Maggie."

"Then I know what I'll do," said Marjorie. "I'll go straight away this minute to Miss Nelson, and ask her if *I* may go and see Susie. I dare say she'll let me—I'll try what I can do, anyhow. You run down and tell Mrs Collins, Hudson. I'm not Ernie, but I dare say Susy would rather see me than no one."

Miss Nelson was writing letters in her own room, when Marjorie with a flushed eager face burst in upon her. She made her request

with great earnestness. Miss Nelson listened anxiously.

"I will see Mrs. Collins," she said at last. The poor woman was brought up to the governess's room, and at sight of her evident grief Miss Nelson at once saw that she must act on her own independent judgment, and explain matters by and by to Mr. Wilton.

"Brewngaddo is away," she said to Mrs. Collins, "but if the case is really serious, she can be sent for, and in the meantime I will take Marjorie myself to the cottage, and if your little girl wishes to see her, she can do so. Fetch your hat, Marjorie, dear, and a warm wrap for the dews are heavy to-night."

Marjorie was not long in getting herself ready, and twenty minutes later the poor anxious mother and her two visitors found themselves in the cottage.

"Look here, Mrs. Collins," said Marjorie, the moment they entered the house. "I want you not to tell Susy I have come. I'd like to slip upstairs very gently, and just see if I can do anything for her. I'll promise to be awfully quiet, and not to do her a scrap of harm."

Mrs. Collins hesitated for a moment. Marjorie was not the Miss Wilton Susy was asking for, and she feared exciting the poor refractory little girl by not carrying out her wishes exactly.

But as Susy's tired feverish voice was distinctly heard in the upper room, and as Miss Nelson said, "I think you can fully trust Marjorie; she is a most tender little nurse," Mrs. Collins yielded.

"You must do as you think best, miss," she said.

Marjorie did not wait for another word. She ran lightly up the narrow stairs, and entered the room where the sick child was sitting up in bed.

"Is that you, Miss Ernie?" said Susy. "I thought you were never coming—never. I thought you had forsook me, just when I am so bad, and like to die."

"It's me, Susy," said Marjorie, coming forward. "Ermengarde's away, so I came."

"Oh, I don't want you, Miss Marjorie," said Susan.

She flung herself back on the bed, and taking up the sheet threw it over her face. Marjorie went up to the bedside.

"There ain't a bit of use in your staying, Miss Marjorie," continued Susy, in a high-pitched, excited voice. "You don't know nothing 'bout me and the picture. You ain't no good at all."

Marjorie's heart gave a great bound. The picture! That must surely mean the broken miniature. "Basil, dear Basil," whispered the little

girl, "you may not have to live down all the horrid, wicked, cruel supicion after all."

"I wish you'd go away, Miss Marjorie," said Susy from under the bedclothes. "I tell you miss, you can't do me one bit of good. You don't know nothing about me and the picture."

"But I can hold your hand, Susy," said Marjorie; "and if your hand is hot, mine is lovely and cool. If you're restless, let me hold your hand. I often do so to baby if he can't sleep, and it quiets him ever so."

Susy did not respond for a minute or two, but presently her poor little hot hand was pushed out from under the bedclothes. Marjorie grasped it firmly. Then she took the other hand, and softly rubbed the hot, dry fingers. Susy opened her burning eyes, flung aside the sheet, and looked at her quiet little visitor.

"You comfort me a bit, miss," she said. "I don't feel so mad with restlessness as I did when you came in."

"That's because I have got soothing hands," said Marjorie. "Some people have, and I suppose I'm one. The children at home always go to sleep when I hold their hands. Don't you think you could shut your eyes and try to go to sleep now, Susy?"

"Oh, miss, there's a weight on my mind. You can't sleep when you're ill and like to

die, and there's a weight pressing down on you."

"I don't believe you'll die, Susy; and if you've a weight on your mind, you can tell God about it, you know."

"No, miss, God's awful angry with me."

"He's never angry with us, if we are sorry about things," answered Marjorie. "He's our Father, and fathers always forgive their children when they are sorry. If you are sorry, Susy, you can tell God, your Father, and he'll be sure to forgive you at once."

"I'm sorry enough, miss, but I think Miss Ernie is as bad as me. I'd never have done it, never, but for Miss Ernie. I think it's mean of her to keep away from me when I'm ill."

"Ermengarde is not at home, Susy; but if you want her very badly, if you really want her for anything important, I will write to her, and she shall come home—I know she will."

"Thank you, Miss Marjorie; I didn't think nothing at all about what I did when I was well, but now it seems to stay with me day and night, and I'm sorry I was so spiteful and mean to Miss Nelson. But it wasn't *my* fault, miss—no, that it wasn't—that the picture was broke. What is it, Miss Marjorie? How you start."

"Nothing," said Marjorie; "only perhaps, Susy, you'd rather tell Ernie the rest; and she *shall*

come back: I promise you that she shall come back."

"Thank you, Miss Marjorie: you are real good, and you comfort me wonderfully when you hold my hands."

"Well, I wish you'd let me put your sheets a little straight; there, that's better. Now I'm going to turn your pillow. And Susy, do let me push all that tangled hair out of your eyes. Now I'm going to kneel here, and you must shut your eyes. I promise you shall see Ernie. Good-night, Susy; go to sleep."

Miss Nelson waited quietly in the little kitchen downstairs. The voices in Susy's sick-room ceased to murmur; presently Mrs. Collins stole softly upstairs. She returned in a few minutes accompanied by Marjorie. There were tears in the poor woman's eyes.

"My Susy's in a blessed, beautiful sleep!" she exclaimed. "And it's all owing to this dear little lady; may Heaven reward her! I don't know how to thank you, Miss Marjorie. Susy hasn't been in a blessed healthful sleep like that since she broke her leg. It puts heart into me to see the child looking quiet and peaceful once again. And now I'll go upstairs and sit with her."

Miss Nelson and Marjorie walked quickly home together. When they reached the house,

the little girl made one request of her governess.

"I want to write to Ermie. May I do it to-night?"

"No, my love, I must forbid that. You are much too tired."

"But it *is* so important—far more important than I can tell you, and I promised Susy."

"Maggie, do you want Ermengarde to come home?"

"Oh, yes; she must come home."

"Then you shall send her a telegram in the morning."

"But that seems cruel. My letter will be far, far better. I could explain things a little in a letter."

Miss Nelson considered for a moment.

"I have great trust in you, Maggie," she said. "I won't question you, for I daresay you have heard something from Susan Collins in confidence. I am sure you would not wish to recall Ermengarde unless there was great need."

"There is; oh, really, there is."

"Then you shall go to bed now, and I will send you to Glendower with Hudson by the first train in the morning."

CHAPTER XXII

QUITE IN A NEW CHARACTER.

THE day was lovely, and Ermengarde woke once more in the best of spirits. Notwithstanding her unhappy day, she had enjoyed herself much the night before. She had worn Lilias's simple white dress, and Marjorie's Maltese cross with its narrow gold chain had given to her appearance just that finish which best suited her youth.

Ermengarde had looked remarkably pretty, and many people had noticed the fact, and one or two of Mr. Wilton's gentlemen friends had congratulated him in quite audible tones on having such a charming and lovely little daughter. Ermengarde had herself heard these words, and had seen a glow, half of sadness half of pleasure, light up her father's dark eyes, and her own heart had swelled within her. She began to know the difference between real praise and flattery. She thought how fascinating it would all be when she was really grown up, and dull lessons were over, and Miss Nelson

was no longer of the slightest consequence, when she could dress as she pleased, and do as she liked.

In the agreeable feelings which these thoughts gave her, she forgot about Basil's displeasure. She ceased to remember that the dearest friendship of her life was in danger of being broken, was so jeopardized that it was scarcely likely that the severed threads could ever be reunited with their old strength. Ermengarde was away from all unpleasant things, her fears about Flora were completely removed, and it was in her selfish and pleasure-loving nature to shut herself away from the memory of what worried her, and to enter fully into the delights of her present life. She rose gayly, and no one could have been merrier than she when she joined Lilias at the breakfast-table. The two girls had this meal quite alone in Lilias Russell's pretty boudoir.

"Shall we ride, or go out in the yacht?" said Lilias to her companion. "I heard father making all arrangements for a sail last night, and I know he'll take us if we ask him. Which would you like best, Ermie? If you are a sailor, I can promise you a good jolly time on board the *Albatross*. I was so sorry you were not with us yesterday."

"Oh, I am a capital sailor," said Ermengarde,

"We were at the Isle of Wight last year, and Basil and I sailed nearly every day. Maggie used to get sick, but we never did."

"There's just a lovely breeze getting up to-day," said Lilias. "I'm so glad you like sailing, Ermie, for I know we shall just have a perfect time. If you'll stay here for a few minutes, I'll run and ask father if he will take us with them."

Lilias stepped out through the open window, and Ermengarde leant against a trellised pillar in the veranda, and looked out over the peaceful summer scene, her pretty eyes full of a dreamy content. She was so happy at the thought that Flora was really gone that she felt very good and amiable; she liked herself all the better for having such nice, comfortable, kindly thoughts about everyone. Even Eric could scarcely have extracted a sharp retort from her at this moment.

Lilias came flying back. "It's all right!" she exclaimed. "The *Albatross* sails in an hour, and we are to meet father and Mr. Wilson, and the other gentlemen who are going to sail, on the quay at half-past eleven. I shall wear my white serge boating costume. Have you anything pretty to put on, Ermie?"

"Nothing so nice as that," said Ermengarde with a jealous look. "There's my dark blue

serge, but it will look dowdy beside your white."

"I have two white serge boating-dresses," said Lilias. "I will lend you one if you will let me. Our figures are almost exactly alike, and we are the same height. My dress had scarcely to be altered at all for you last night. Come, Ernie, don't look so solemn. You shall look charming, I promise, and I will make you up such a posy to wear in your button-hole. Now, shall we stroll about, or just sit here and be lazy?"

"Do let us sit here," said Ermengarde. "You don't know what a comfort the stillness is, Lily. At this hour at home all the little ones are about, and they make such a fuss and noise. I think it's the worst management to allow children to keep bothering one at all hours of the day."

"Well, I'm not tried in that way," said Lilias, with a quick half-suppressed sigh, "and as I adore children I am afraid I can't quite sympathize.—O Ernie, what a queer old shandrydan is coming up the avenue! Who can be in it? Who can be coming here at this hour? Why, I do declare it's the one-horse fly from the station! Noah's Ark, we call that fly, it's so rusty and fusty, and so little in demand: for you know, when people

come to Glendower, we always send for them, and I don't think the station is any use except for shunting purposes, and to land our visitors. Who *can* be coming in Noah's Ark?"

Just then a very rough little head, surmounted by a brown straw hat, was pushed out of one of the windows of the old fly: a lot of wild, long, disordered hair began to wave in the breeze; and a hand was waved frantically to the two girls, as they sat in the cool veranda.

"Why, it's Maggie!" exclaimed Lilias. "It's Maggie, the duck, the sweet! How delicious! *What* has brought her?"

She took a flying leap down the veranda steps, and across the lawn, to meet the old fly.

"It's Maggie!" echoed Ermengarde, who did not rush to meet her little sister. "What has happened? what *has* gone wrong now?"

She rose from the luxurious chair in which she was lounging and, throwing back her head, gazed watchfully at the fervent meeting which was taking place between Lilias and Marjorie.

"Detestable of Maggie to follow me like this!" muttered Ermengarde. "I wonder Miss Nelson allows it. Really our governess is worse than useless, not a bit the sort of person to teach girls in our position. Now, what *can* be up? Oh, and there's Hudson! Poor, prim,

proper old Hudson. She has come to take care of the darling cherub who never does wrong. Well I think it's taking a great liberty with Lady Russell's establishment, and I only trust and hope father will give it hotly to Miss Nelson."

"Well, Maggie." Ermengarde advanced a step or two in a very languid manner. "Oh, don't throttle me, please. How very hot and messy you look! and what has brought *you* to Glendower?"

"The dear kind train, and the dear kind Noah's Ark," interrupted Lilias. "Don't I bless them both! Mag, I want to show you my grotto: I arranged the shells in the pattern you spoke of last year. They look awfully well, only I'm not quite sure that I like such a broad row of yellow shells round the edge."

Lilias spoke with some rapidity. She was standing opposite the two sisters; she was not at all an obtuse girl, and she felt annoyed at Ermengarde's coldness to Marjorie, and wanted to make up to her by extra enthusiasm on her own part. Lilias had never seen the home side of Ermie's character, and was amazed at the change in her expression.

"O Lily, I should love to look at the grotto!" exclaimed Marjorie, "and perhaps I'll have time for just one peep. But I'm going

back again by the next train, and it's awfully important that I should speak to Ernie—awfully important."

Marjorie was never a pretty child, and she certainly did not look her best at that moment. Fatigue had deprived her of what slight color she ever possessed; her hair was dreadfully tossed, her holland frock rumpled and not too clean, and her really beautiful gray eyes looked over-anxious. Marjorie's whole little face at that moment had a curious careworn look, out of keeping with its round and somewhat babyish form.

"If you want to talk to Ernie, I'll run away," said Lilias. "I'll find mother, and tell her that you've come, Maggie; and we must discover some expedient for keeping you, now that you have arrived."

When Lilias finished speaking she left the room, and Ermengarde instantly turned to Marjorie.

"This is really too silly!" she said. "I felt obliged to you two days ago, but I'd rather never have come than see you here now making such an exhibition of yourself. Do you know that you have taken a very great liberty, forcing yourself into the house this way?"

"I'm going back again by the next train,

Ermie, and I *did* think that you'd rather have me than a telegram."

"*You* than a telegram? I want neither you nor a telegram. Maggie, I think you are the most exasperating child in the world!"

"Well, Ermie, you won't let me speak. I've come about Susy; she let out all about the miniature to me last night."

"About the miniature!" echoed Ermengarde rather faintly. Her defiant manner left her; her face turned pale. "The miniature!" she said. Then her eyes blazed with anger. "Why have *you* interfered with Susy Collins, Maggie?" she said. "Have you disobeyed my father, too?"

"No, Ermie. I'll tell you about it—you have got to listen. I'll tell you in as few words as I can. You know, Ermie, that Basil has got into trouble with father. He gave Miss Nelson back the miniature, and father thought that Basil had first stolen it, and then broken it; and father was very, very angry with Basil, so Basil wouldn't come to Glendower, although he wanted to. And last night Basil came to sit with me in my room, and I told him I meant to clear him, for I knew as well as anything that he had never stolen the picture or broken it, or done anything shabby. And Basil said that I was *not* to clear him, that he didn't

wish to be cleared, and that he'd live it down. Basil and I went away to father's room to look at the moon, and Basil asked me to leave him there, for he wanted to be alone with mother's picture. Then I went away, and it was late, and I was going to bed, when Hudson came and told me that Mrs. Collins had come, and that she wanted you; and Mrs. Collins was crying awfully, and she said Susy was very bad, and she was always calling out for you, and if you didn't go to see her, perhaps Susy would die.

"So then I went to see Susy, and she really was awfully ill; she had fever, and was half delirious; and she talked about the picture, and about its being broken, and she wanted you so dreadfully. Then I promised I'd bring you to her to-day, and that quieted her a little, and no one else heard what she said about the miniature. Miss Nelson went with me to the Collinses' cottage last night, and I told her how important it was that you should see Susy, but she does not know the reason. No one knows the reason but me."

"And you——" said Ermengarde.

"Yes, Ernie, I know. I couldn't help guessing, but I haven't told. I have left that for you."

Ermengarde turned her head away.

"I thought I'd be better than a telegram," began Marjorie again.

"O Maggie, do stop talking for a moment, and let me think."

Ermengarde pressed her hand to her forehead. She felt utterly bewildered, and a cold fear, the dread of exposure and discovery, gave a furtive miserable expression to her face.

Just then Lilias came into the room.

"I hope your great confab is over?" she exclaimed. "Mother is so pleased you have arrived, Maggie, and of course she insists on your remaining, now that you have come. Hudson can go home and pack your things, and send them to you, and you shall come out in the yacht with us; we'll have twice as jolly a day as we would have had without you, Maggie."

"But I must go home, really," said Marjorie, "and—so must Ermie, too, I'm afraid."

"Yes," said Ermengarde, rousing herself with an effort, and coming forward. "Maggie has brought me bad news. There's a poor little girl at home, the daughter of our head game-keeper. She broke her leg a week ago, and she's very ill now with fever or something, and she's always calling for me. I—I—used to be kind to her, and I think I must go. Maggie says she never rests calling for me."

"It's very noble of you to go," said Lilias. "This quite alters the case. Let me run and tell mother. Oh, how grieved I am! but dear Ernie, of course you do right. That poor little girl—I can quite understand her looking up to you and loving you, Ernie. Let me fly to mother and tell her. She'll be so concerned!"

In a very few moments Lady Russell and Mr. Wilton had both joined the conference. Mr. Wilton looked grave, and asked a few rather searching questions, but Marjorie's downright little narrative of Susy's sufferings softened everyone, and Ermengarde presently left the house, with the chastened halo of a saint round her young head.

Her saint-like conduct, and the romantic devotion of the poor retainer's daughter, made really quite a pretty story, and was firmly believed in by Lady Russell and Lilias. Mr. Wilton, however, had his doubts. "Ernie in the rôle of the self-denying martyr is too new and foreign for me," he muttered. "There's something at the back of this. Basil in disgrace (which he well deserves, the impudent young scoundrel), and Ermengarde the friend and support of the suffering poor! those things are too new to be altogether consistent. There's something at the back of this mystery, and I shall go home and see what it means to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXIII.

BLESSED AND HAPPY.

ERMENGARDE was sitting in her own room, and Marjorie was standing by her side. It was the day after Ermie's unexpected return home. She had spent a couple of hours with Susy, and Miss Nelson had given her a grave but kind welcome. Now the first day was over, the first night had gone by, and Ermengarde was sitting, resting her cheek upon her hand, by the open window of her pretty bedroom.

Marjorie was lolling against the window-ledge; her anxious eyes were fixed on Ermengarde, who was looking away from her, and whose pretty face wore a particularly sullen expression.

"Well, Ermie, what will you do?" asked Marjorie, in a gentle voice.

"Oh, I don't know—don't worry me."

"But you must make up your mind. Miss Nelson is waiting."

"Let her wait; what do I care?"

"Ernie, what's the good of talking like that? Miss Nelson is our governess, and mother used to be fond of her. You know it was mother asked her to come and take care of us when she knew that God was going to take her away. So, Ernie, there's no use in being disrespectful to her, for, even if it wasn't very wrong, father wouldn't allow it for a minute. Ernie, do you know that father has come back?"

"No! What can he have come back for?" Ermengarde raised her brows in some alarm. "I can't make out why he should have shortened his visit to Glendower," she added anxiously.

"I can't tell you, Ernie. He's talking to Basil now; they are walking up and down in the shrubbery."

"Oh, well, Basil—Basil is all right."

Marjorie felt a flood of indignant color filling her face.

"Basil won't tell," she said, in her sturdy voice. "That's quite true. Basil has promised, and he'd never break his word. But Miss Nelson is different, and she—she has determined to find out the truth."

Ermengarde sprang from her chair.

"What do you mean, Maggie?"

"I'm awfully sorry, Ernie, but I really mean what I say. Miss Nelson says she is determined to find out everything. She has sent

for you to speak to you. You had much better come to her. Oh, now, I knew you'd be too late! That's her knock at the door."

The rather determined knock was immediately followed by the lady in question. Miss Nelson was a very gentle woman, but her eyes now quite blazed with anger.

"Ermengarde, it is quite a quarter of an hour since I sent for you."

Ernie lowered her eyes—she did not speak. Miss Nelson seated herself.

"Why did you not come to me, Ermengarde, when I sent Maggie for you?"

"I—I didn't want to."

Miss Nelson was silent for a minute.

"I anticipated your saying something of this kind," she remarked presently. "So, as it is necessary we should meet, I took the trouble to come to you. Ermengarde, look at me."

With a great effort Ernie raised her eyes.

"What did Susy Collins say to you, yesterday?"

"I—I don't want to tell you"

"I desire you to tell me."

"I—I can't."

"You mean you won't."

"I can't tell you, Miss Nelson."

Ermengarde clasped and unclasped her hands. Her expression was piteous.

Miss Nelson was again silent for a few minutes.

"Ermengarde," she said then, "this is not the time for me to say I am sorry for you. I have a duty to perform, and there are moments when duties must come first of all. Susan Collins's excitement, her almost unnatural desire to see you, have got to be accounted for. There is a cloud over Basil that must be explained away. There is a mystery about a little old miniature of mine: it was stolen by some one, and broken by some one. The story of that miniature somebody must tell. At the risk of your father's displeasure I took Maggie to visit Susy Collins the other night. You were away on a visit with your father, and I allowed Maggie to fetch you home. There is undoubtedly an adequate reason for this, but I must know it, for I have to explain matters to Mr. Wilton; therefore, Ermengarde, if you will not tell me fully and frankly and at once all that occurred between you and Susy yesterday, I will go myself and see the Collinses, and will learn the whole story from Susy's own lips."

"Oh, you will not," said Ermengarde. "You never could be so cruel!"

All her self-possession had deserted her. Her face was white, her voice trembled.

"I must go, Ermie. Wretched child, why

don't you save yourself by telling me all you know at once?"

"I cannot, I cannot!"

Ermengarde turned her head away. Miss Nelson rose to leave the room.

"I am going to my room," she said; "I will wait there for half an hour. If at the end of half an hour you do not come to me, I must go to see the Collinses."

Ermengarde covered her face with her hands. Miss Nelson left the room.

"Ermie," said Marjorie in her gentlest voice.

"I wish you'd leave me," said Ermengarde. "There would never have been all this mischief but for you: I do wish you'd go away!"

"If you only would be brave enough to tell the truth," whispered Marjorie.

"Do, do go away! Leave me to myself."

With great reluctance the little girl left the room. As she sidled along the wall, she looked back several times. A word, a glance would have brought her back. But the proud, still little figure by the window did not move a muscle. The angry eyes looked steadily outward: the lips were firmly closed. Marjorie banged the door after her; she did not mean to, but the open window had caused a draught, and Ermengarde with a long shiver realized that she was alone.

"Now, that's a comfort," she murmured; "now I can think. Have I time to rush up to Susy, and tell her that she is not to let out a single word? Half an hour—Miss Nelson gives me half an hour. I could reach the Collinses' cottage in about ten minutes, if I flew over the grass; five minutes with Susy, and then ten minutes back again. I can do it—I will!"

She seized her hat, rushed to the door, ran along the corridor, and down the stairs. In a moment she was out. Her fleet young steps carried her lightly as a fawn over the grass, and down the path which led to Susy's cottage. How fast her heart beat! Surely she would be in time!

A short cut to the Collinses' cottage lay through a small paddock which cut off an angle of the park. Ermie remembered this, and made for it now. There was a stile to climb, but this was no obstacle to the country-bred girl. She reached the paddock, vaulted lightly over the stile, and was about to rush along the beaten path when she was suddenly brought face to face with the two people whom in all the world she wished least to see just then—her father and Basil. They, too, were walking in the paddock, and met Ermengarde close to the stile.

Ermie had never seen her father's face wear

a sterner, or more displeased expression, but it was not his glance which frightened her most just then; it was a certain proud, resigned, yet strong look which flashed at her for an instant out of Basil's beautiful eyes. This, joined to an expression of suffering round his lips, gave Ermengarde for the first time a glimpse of the abyss of deceit and wrong-doing into which she was plunging.

A great longing for Basil's love and approbation rushed over her. The desire for this was stronger in that first brief moment than her fear of meeting her father. She stood perfectly still, her hands dropped to her sides; she had not a word to say.

"You can go home," said Mr. Wilton, turning to his son; "I have expressed my opinion; I don't mean to repeat it—there is nothing further to say."

Basil did not make any reply to this speech nor did he again look at Ermengarde. He went to the stile, vaulted over it, and disappeared.

"And now, Ermie, where are you going to?" said her father.

"Home," she answered confusedly. "I am going home."

"My dear, I never knew that this way through the paddock led home. Come, Ermen-

garde, I am tired of prevarication. What does all this mean?"

"Don't ask me, father. I mean I'll tell you presently. I want to see Miss Nelson."

"Is Miss Nelson at the other side of this paddock? Ermengarde, I insist upon it, I will be answered."

"Give me half an hour, father, a quarter of an hour—ten minutes—just to see Miss Nelson, and—and—Basil."

"Then you are in league with Basil, too! A nice state I find my family in! I give a distinct and simple order to you, which you disobey. Basil, whom I always supposed to be the soul of honor, has behaved with wanton cruelty toward a lady who was your mother's friend, whom I respect, and who has been placed more or less in authority over you all. Not a word, Ermengarde. Basil has as good as confessed his guilt, and I can only say that my old opinion of him can never be restored. Then, I take you away on a visit, and Maggie comes to fetch you home, because, forsooth, the quarrelsome daughter with whom I have forbidden you to have any intercourse is feverish, and wants to have a conversation with you. Nonsense, Ermie! you posed very well at the Russells' yesterday as a little philanthropist, but that role, my dear, is not yours. Susan

Collins had a far stronger reason for recalling you from Glendower than the simple desire for your company. Come, Ermie, this mystery has got to be cleared up. This is *not* the road home, nor am I aware that Miss Nelson resides at the other end of the paddock. But this narrow path leads directly to Collins's cottage. I presume you are going there. If you have no objection, we will go together, my dear."

"Yes, father, I have every objection. You need not go to Collins's. I—I won't keep it in any longer."

"I thought I should bring you to your senses. Now, what have you got to say?"

"It's on account of Basil."

"Leave Basil's name out, please. I am not going to be cajoled into restoring him to my favor again."

Ermengarde's face, which had been growing whiter and whiter during this interview, now became convulsed with a spasm of great agony. She put up her trembling hands to cover it. This was not a moment for tears. Her hot eyes were dry.

"Father, you don't know Basil. *He* has done nothing wrong, nothing. It's all me. It's all me, father."

And then the miserable story, bit by bit, was revealed to Mr. Wilton; it was told reluctantly,

for even now Ermengarde would have shielded herself if she could. Without a single word or comment, the narrative was listened to. Then Mr. Wilton, taking Ermie's hand, walked silently back to the house with her. Miss Wilton came down the steps of the front entrance to meet them.

"Good-morning, Ermengarde," she said. "How queer and dragged you look! Roderick, I want to speak to you."

"I will come to you presently, Elizabeth. I am particularly engaged just now."

"But you are not going to take that child in through the front entrance?"

"Will you allow me to pass, please?"

Mr. Wilton's voice was so firm that his sister made no further comment, but with a shrug of her shoulders turned aside.

"If only Elizabeth were a different woman, I might not have scenes like this," murmured the poor man.

He went to his study, and there, to his great astonishment, found Marjorie and Basil both waiting for him.

"We saw you coming up the field" said Marjorie at once. "And I knew Ermie had told. I knew it by her face, and the way she walked. I told Basil so, and I said we would come in here, for I guessed you'd bring Ermie here.

Dear Ermie, you are brave now! Dear Ermie!"

Marjorie ran up to her sister.

"It's all going to be quite right now," she said. And she raised her flushed eager face, and looked at her father.

Mr. Wilton went straight to Basil's side.

"I misunderstood you, my boy; forgive me," he said.

Ermengarde stood erect and stiff. She had not shed a tear, nor made any response to Marjorie's words. Her whole soul was in her face, however. She was watching her father's greeting of Basil. She waited for its effect.

The few words uttered by Mr. Wilton were magical. Something seemed to flash out of Basil's eyes. They looked straight up into his father's, then dropped to the ground.

"Father," he murmured. His father grasped his hand.

"O Basil," suddenly sobbed Ermie. Her fortitude gave way; she rushed to her brother and almost groveled at his feet.

"Now, what's to be done?" said Mr. Wilton, turning in a perplexed kind of way to his younger daughter. "I confess it, I never felt more confused and put out in all my life. I brought Ermengarde here to punish her most severely."

"Oh, please, father, don't! Let it be a full, complete, jolly kind of forgiveness all round. Look at Basil, father."

Mr. Wilton turned his head. Basil was on his knees, and his arms were round Ermie, her head rested on his shoulder.

"Oh, father, do let us come out and leave them together for a little!"

"Really, Maggie, you don't treat me with a bit of respect," said Mr. Wilton. But his voice was low, the frown had cleared from his brow, and he pinched Marjorie's firm round cheek.

"I suppose I must humor you, little woman," he said, "for after all you are the only member of my family who never gets into scrapes."

"Oh, father, I'm so happy!" They were outside the study door now, and Marjorie, still clinging to her father's hand, was skipping up and down. "Everything will be as right as possible now, and no one, no one in all the world can help Ermie as Basil can."

"I believe you are right there, Maggie," said Mr. Wilton. "My poor lad, he certainly has done a noble, Quixotic sort of thing. I can't forgive myself for being so harsh with him."

"Oh, father Basil quite understood. He didn't wish to be cleared, you know."

"Yes, yes, I see daylight at last."

"Father, what do you mean by Basil being Quixotic?"

"I'll tell you another time, puss. And so *you* knew of this all the time?"

"Only since the night before last. I wanted Ermie to tell you herself. Basil wouldn't tell, and he wouldn't let me. Now it's all right. Oh, how happy I am! Now it's all right.

"And you really mean me to let Ermengarde off her punishment, Mag?"

"Well, father?"

Marjorie put her head a little on one side, and adopted her most sagacious and goody-goody manner.

"Wouldn't it be well to see if Ermie hasn't learnt something by this lesson, you know? I expect Ermie has suffered a lot."

"Not she—not she."

"Oh, but, father, I think she has. Couldn't you wait until the next time to punish Ermie, father?"

"Well, you're a dear child," said Mr. Wilton, "and perhaps, for your sake——"

"Oh, no, father, for Basil's sake."

"Well then, for Basil's sake."

Marjorie kissed her father about a dozen times.

"You'll let Ermie just learn by her experience to be better another time, and that will be her

only punishment," said Marjorie, in her wisest manner.

"Well, Maggie, I suppose I must yield to you. And now, as this is to be, and I am not to assume the role of the severe father—between ourselves, Maggie, I hate rôles—do let us drop the subject. I feel inclined for a game with the young ones. What do you say?"

"I say that the sun has come out, and I am as happy as the day is long," replied Marjorie. "Give me another kiss, please, father. Lucy, is that you? Father is coming to have a romp with us all. Just one minute, please, father. I must go and tell Miss Nelson the good news."

"What a blessed, happy, dear little thing Maggie is!" thought Mr. Wilton as, holding Lucy's hand, he walked slowly to the nursery playground. "She's more like her mother than any of them. Yes, this may be a lesson to Ermengarde. Poor child, I hope so."

It was late that evening when Ermengarde and Basil, standing side by side under their mother's picture, solemnly kissed each other.

"Basil, you will never love me in the old way again."

"I love you better than anyone else in all the world, Erme. Look up into mother's eyes; they are smiling at you."

"I know what they are saying," answered Ermengarde. She clasped her hands; there was a stronger, better look than Basil had ever noticed before on her pretty face. "Mother's eyes are saying, 'You have been very selfish, Ermie, and very ——' What is it, Basil?"

"Yes," interrupted Basil. "I think selfishness was at the root of all this trouble. I never knew any one so *unselfish* as Maggie."

"And mother's eyes say," continued Ermengarde, "'take courage—and—and——'"

"I think mother is telling you to try to copy our dear little Maggie," said Basil.

THE END.

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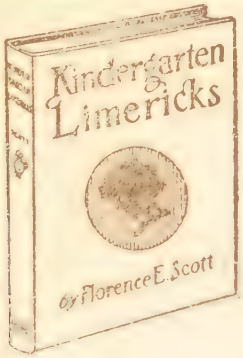

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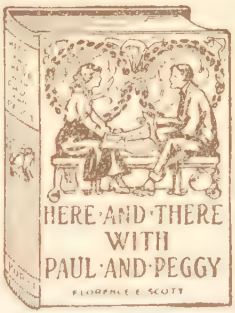

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